

TEXT PROBLEM WITHIN THE BOOK ONLY

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

OU_210043

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

28-4-81—10,000.

OSMANIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

823/R64S Accession No. 27375

should be returned on or before the date last marked below

SUNSTROKE is crammed with hectic adventures, breathless escapes, action, excitement, mysteries, dangers, enemy agents—and a love interest, all of which will hold the reader spellbound throughout.

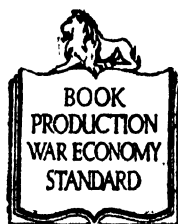
SUNSTROKE

SUNSTROKE

By
ANTHONY ROBERTS

THE BOOK CLUB
121 CHARING CROSS ROAD, LONDON, W.C.2

FIRST PUBLISHED 1943



This book is produced in complete conformity with the
authorised economy standards

PRINTED AND BOUND IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
THE HOLLEN STREET PRESS LTD.
LONDON. W.1

Dedicated
to
Raquel

*All the characters in this novel are as fictitious
as ANTHONY ROBERTS himself, and no simi-
larity to any persons, living or dead, is intended.*

CONTENTS

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
ONE	7
TWO	21
THREE	48
FOUR	77
FIVE	92
SIX	106
SEVEN	126
EIGHT	154
NINE	171
TEN	192

ONE

It all started on Monday the fourteenth of August nineteen hundred and thirty-nine. I had just returned from a short visit to Copenhagen, and was staying in Half Moon Street. My flat there served as an anchorage to my somewhat aimless ramblings. It was a bachelor flat, situated on the fifth floor of a thin brick building, sandwiched between a lawyer and a small hotel. The owner of the house, an Irishman called Patsy, was an earnest pot-bellied little man whose sole eccentricity was an apparent dislike of coats and jackets. During our meetings I never saw him in anything but shirt sleeves. He was not untidy, however, for his blue waistcoat and linen shirt were of the finest quality, while his ties, although gaudy, were always faultlessly tied and showed no uncomfortable gaps, twists, or glimpses of an unpolished stud.

He suited me well, for he was quiet and discreet, and kept everything clean with the help of a succession of pretty but white-faced maids, who appeared silently and obediently from the radio-echoing basements at the first touch of a bell.

The flat itself consisted of a sitting-room full of leather armchairs, heavy curtains and bronze ash-trays, a comfortable bedroom with a bathroom attached, and a smaller guest-room. Meals were brought up by the white-faced girls, and with breakfast and tea came the mail and papers.

My mail was usually simple, three or four faithful old bills, an occasional receipt and a few private letters. It was, therefore, with something of a shock that I saw a neat buff-coloured envelope with the words: "On His

Majesty's Service," printed across the top. It bore no stamp, being a generous gift of the tax-payers. In the left-hand corner was printed: "If undelivered please return to the Under Secretary of State, the War Office."

I ignored the bacon and eggs and opened the letter. It was short and terse. Would I call at the War Office at my earliest convenience and bring this letter with me?

I was very surprised, for until that date had had nothing to do with any Government Office, believing, like a true Briton, that the governing of my country was no affair of mine. I wondered how they knew about me. I studied the signature at the foot of the letter. I was, of course, unable to decipher it. Then I saw with a start that the gentleman who was writing to me was a "Colonel for General, Director of Military Intelligence." It was a horrible shock, almost as bad as indigestion.

The words "Military Intelligence" immediately conjured up a series of pictures that filled me with horror. Masked gentlemen with steaming pistols, soft-eyed vamps, random shots on murky nights and ghostly cars screaming through the mists chased each other rapidly through the idle fertility of my brain.

Next, a more frightening thought occurred to me, Perhaps, during my many visits to the Continent, my movements have given rise to suspicion! Perhaps in all innocence I had been in contact with International Spies who, themselves under observation, put all newcomers under the same scrutiny? I began to recall feverishly the places I had visited during the past twelve months. Christmas and the New Year in Switzerland, June and July in Paris for the Season, and the first fortnight of August in Denmark, from which country I had just returned. All this might appear suspicious, especially as Germany and Poland

were at loggerheads and war was expected every day. I had met hundreds of people and any one of them might have been anything. It was an unpleasant thought.

When I returned to my breakfast I did not enjoy it, for it had grown cold and the coffee, doubtless under the influence of my imagination, tasted strongly of arsenic.

I dressed very carefully. After all, a good appearance is always helpful, and if I were to be shot at dawn I wished to go down as elegantly as possible. I chose my grey flannel suit, a quiet tie and a white poplin shirt. A red carnation, supplied by Patsy, and a corner of my handkerchief appearing out of my breast pocket completed my preparations and with a feeling that I was going to the dentist I set out for the War Office.

I chose the route by the Green Park, the Mall, Admiralty Arch and Whitehall, for the trees were pleasant and shady, and the glimpses of London still beautiful, in spite of the excavations and preparations for the coming war.

. ,

It is strange how a simple walk can be distorted by imagination. Every tree seemed to hide an agent ; every old gentleman in high-winged collar was a desperado ; every nursemaid a spy, and even the policemen seemed to eye me with long-searching looks as if to say : " Ah ! Ah ! We know all about you, Mr. Roberts, you're for it, you ain't 'alf." An old woman shouting " Violets " and holding up a bunch became a secret harbinger of an encoded warning ; while the tramp of feet behind me were shadows, and the idlers hiding behind their newspapers could be nothing but disguised police officers watchful of my step.

I consequently arrived at my destination in a very low state of morale and crept reluctantly into the court-

yard of the War Office, convinced that the only way I'd emerge again would be feet first in an oblong box.

I stated my business. The door-keeper in blue uniform looked disparagingly at me, read my letter, took down my particulars, gave me a form to complete and turning to a one-armed minion told him to "take Mr. Roberts to Room 1026." He then stood back, shook his head sorrowfully and left me.

I followed my new jailor (I somehow could not look upon him as anything else) through the famous Rabbit Warrens of the War Office. I was at first amazed at the complicated system of passages, but slowly realised that its purpose was as dreadful as it was effective: no stranger once inside could ever emerge again without the help of a jailor: there was therefore no hope for the would-be evader!

"Wait here," said the jailor as he knocked at a door.

I waited patiently. My self-confidence, already badly shaken, ran away altogether. The door opened presently and the jailor, who now seemed both pleased and relieved, said:

"Come in, please."

I came in and the door was shut behind me.

The room was small and bare. There was no carpet on the worn and dusty floor-boards, no pictures on the walls. In the far corner was a desk of old wood, upon which stood a line of big trays overflowing with documents. Behind the desk sat a little dried-up man with a bald head and thick glasses, dressed in a faded blue suit, and looking more like a Civil Servant than a Civil Servant himself.

He stood up with embarrassed speed.

"Ah, Mr. Roberts, I believe?" he asked in a very pleasant tone of voice.

I nodded.

"Please sit down."

He waved to an old leather armchair placed at an angle to his desk. I sat down carefully, pulling up the legs of my trousers so as not to spoil the crease, then tweaking my tie out of place in an effort to improve it, I coughed loudly in a mixture of uncertainty and nervousness.

In the meantime the little man had sat down again and had pulled a large, pale cover towards him upon which my name was scrawled in pencil. He opened it and I was amazed to see it full of letters and memos of various shapes and sizes. I concluded that the whole story of my insipid past lay between those anæmic covers.

The Colonel—for I presumed him to be such—turned over each of the pages carefully, giving vent from time to time to a considered "Hem!" Eventually he looked up and placing his fingers carefully together leant back in his chair and looked thoughtfully at me.

Unnerved by this silent scrutiny, I only managed with difficulty to suppress the desire to stand up and scream. However, with the knowledge that I might as well put as bold a face upon it as I could, I stared back at him.

He relaxed, grinned, and pushing a flattened packet of cigarettes at me said: "Have one."

His voice was pleasant and soft.

I took one, lit it and sat back thankfully.

"Feel better?" laughed the Colonel.

I sat up and said: "Er—yes, sir."

"Good! I'm afraid you must have a very poor opinion of me by now. Shocking manners, I know, putting a guest ill at ease. Shocking, but I wanted to study you awhile before we spoke. I always go by first impressions. They are the truest. One's subsequent judgments are always dimmed by knowledge and habit. Do you agree?"

"Yes," I answered, adding, a little too eagerly—
"What was your first impression of me?"

He laughed; did not answer, but said instead:

"I expect you are wondering why you were asked here?"

"Yes," I answered.

"I'll tell you."

Instead of telling me, however, the strange little man looked down at his papers again and said:

"I see you travel a lot."

"Yes."

"Travelling is great fun, isn't it?"

"Yes," I answered, "I like it."

"One sees so many angles of life. It's a fascinating pastime. I suppose you are a student of human nature?"

"Yes," I answered again, feeling that truthfulness was my only hope, "I write."

"You do! How interesting! What sort of things?"

"Novels."

"Do you publish under your own name?"

I shuffled awkwardly.

"Er—no—I'm afraid I've never had anything published, but I will one day. I've been trying long enough."

"I'm sure you will and, of course, you are gathering such useful data from your travels."

"That's it," I said eagerly, happy to be on familiar ground. "I do not think a writer can be any good until he is thirty."

"You are twenty-five."

"Twenty-four."

"Of course, so you still have six years to go."

"I want to collect as much material as possible. People think I'm lazy and rush aimlessly about from

place to place intent only on pleasure, but in reality I'm accumulating a great field of experiences. I've already lived in a Benedictine Monastery, a Nudist camp, the Latin Quarter and with the White Russian Colony in Paris. Not bad for a beginning ! "

I stopped, a little ashamed of my outburst.

The Colonel was nodding pleasantly. I found that I liked him. He was so sympathetic and understanding. He was unlike any colonel I had met before. I felt that we could become friends.

" Surely your people do not approve of all this wandering about ? "

" I have no parents. My father was killed in the last war and my mother died soon afterwards."

" Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that."

" I have a guardian who has been very good to me, but as long as I keep out of trouble he does not interfere with my life."

" Very wise. I wish more parents were like that. I expect, however, that you make up for this by being tied to a girl—a fiancée ? A young chap like you must be interested in women, eh ? "

" I am not engaged and not likely to be, either," I said shortly.

" A sore point, eh ? Sorry to have mentioned it."

" Not at all," I answered quickly, afraid that he had taken offence ; " as a matter of fact, I was very attached to a girl a couple of years ago but she threw me up for a big banana merchant, and since then women have never meant very much to me. I believe in freedom and safety in numbers ! "

" Excellent, excellent," beamed the Colonel. " With all this freedom you have doubtlessly some very original views on life and such things ? "

I laughed and said :

"I'm afraid not. I have not yet had time to form any definite views. I don't believe that a man should accept a certain view merely because he has been educated to that view, nor that he should embrace another just because it is in direct opposition to the one he has held up till then."

"Very rightly too, you are, therefore, receptive."

"Yes, in a way. I try to assimilate good points and reject bad ones. It doesn't always work though."

"I see. I suppose that with all this travelling you must find much good in the countries you have visited and much bad in your own?"

"Have you travelled much, sir?" I asked.

"Quite a bit," answered the Colonel. "Why?"

"Have you found that while travelling broadens the mind and induces tolerance, it deepens at the same time the attachment to one's own country? The best part of my travels has always been the moment I land in Dover, climb aboard the London train and find everything so calm, quiet and efficient. No more smells, no more shouts, and no more noisy rocking trains. Instead, there is a bell above your seat which you know will be answered the moment you ring it and will bring an attendant with that blessed cup of tea and plate of buttered toast! It is then, with London round the corner, that 'Home Sweet Home' really has some meaning."

"I entirely agree," cried the Colonel with enthusiasm. "I know the feeling so well but there is a better one."

"Oh?"

"Yes—when you've done a good job of work for England."

"For England?" I cried blankly. It sounded strange.

"Yes, some of us work for our country."

"Really!" I cried, vaguely surprised that one could

serve one's country when it was at peace. "Of course, everyone gives up everything during a war, but in peace it seems so unnecessary."

"Why do you say 'give up everything'? I assure you that nothing is given up but, on the contrary, much gained. An idle life becomes important, aimlessness directed, and there is no little voice to upbraid one when the papers rant against 'the idle rich.'"

I felt that this was in some way a veiled reproach at my form of life.

"I'm not 'the idle rich,'" I cried indignantly. "As I told you before I am collecting material for future publication. My books, I hope, will one day bring pleasure to many. My conscience is quiet."

"My dear Roberts, I was not referring to you in any way. I merely remarked that personally I knew a deeper satisfaction than arriving home from the Continent."

"Sorry," I said; then remembering that I had been summoned here and that the reason for my appearance could not be for the sole purpose of discussing the relative means of attaining contentment, I said:

"You still have not told me of the reason for asking me here."

"I'm coming to that," said the Colonel.

He turned over the loose leaves of the ledger.

"You were in Corsica in May, weren't you?"

"Yes," I answered with an uncomfortable feeling in my stomach.

"You stayed at the Nord-Sud Hotel."

"Yes I did," I answered in surprise.

"You spent much of your time divided between Yetty's Bar and The Little Corporal?"

"The evenings—yes—everyone did, unless they went up to the night club at Bishop's Palace."

"And during the day you bathed?"

"I wrote, too—occasionally."

"Yes, I believe you did."

"And admired the flowers. The *maquis* is beautiful in May. Purple, yellow and green climb up the sides of the mountains and vanish into the forests."

"So I understand. You met many people?"

"Hundreds. Everybody was very friendly."

"Do you remember John Buckingham?"

"John Buckingham? Of course, we went about a great deal."

"What do you think of him?"

"John," I replied. "He was amusing. Rather pompous and inclined to lay down the law. Quite a good egg. He wrote, I believe, but not very seriously. He seemed to have money. I don't know what he did for a living. The question never arose. Why are you asking this?"

"He wants you to go out to him."

"Wants me?" I cried, amazed. "Why doesn't he write to me direct? Why go this round-about way? Is he a relative of yours?"

"Oh no. He wants us to send you out officially."

"You . . . send . . . me . . . officially?"

"Yes," said the Colonel, drily. "You see he is one of our agents out there."

"Agent?" I gasped. "John! An agent? A spy?"

"We prefer the term agent. Spies are generally professional gentlemen who sell their information to the highest bidder. Agents work for their country."

I was too astounded to speak. I was recalling all that I could remember of John Buckingham, his ways and his manners, in the hope of discovering some item that might have given me a clue to his real activities. I could find none. Even now that I knew that he was in the British Intelligence Service I retained the same

impression of him. He was such an ordinary sort of fellow. Someone like me. Spies were always rather sinister. He was anything but sinister!

He wanted me. At first I had not paid much attention to that part of the Colonel's words. Now they came forcibly back to me and the more I thought of it the more puzzled I became.

I looked at the Colonel and found that he was beaming hopefully at me. It was almost as if he could read my thoughts and was laughing at me.

"What does he want me for?"

"We do not quite know."

"Oh!"

"He was sent out to Paris on an important mission. It has apparently taken him to Corsica. He is doubtlessly on the track of something big, for he informs us that he needs help. Instead of sending one of our usual men he has asked us to send you, because, as he says, 'Anthony Roberts has been here before and his arrival would cause no suspicion. Besides his conduct here in May has left everybody with the firm conviction that he is the typical English fool with too much money to spend'."

"What!" I burst out indignantly. This was really too much!

"He goes on to say, 'I am convinced that he is no fool, and is the very man for the job out here, where any of your regulars would be spotted at once'."

"Oh!" I said, mollified but still smarting.

"Then he adds that he believes from conversations he has had with you that you would leap at the opportunity, as it would give you excellent copy and an insight to a new way of living. We were very doubtful at first of the advisability of employing an outsider on a job of this nature. However, John is one of our most

reliable men and we immediately took steps to . . . er . . . check up on you. This . . ." he flicked the leaves carelessly, ". . . is a complete record hour by hour of your movements since your return from Denmark."

"How did you find me in the first place?"

"John gave us your address and the talkative Mr. Patsy of Half Moon Street gave us the rest."

"Do you mean to say that I have been trailed for the last week or so?"

"Every minute."

I felt hot and moist under the collar. It is not a pleasant thing to discover that one's movements have been observed and noted on paper as if one were a microbe under observation. I searched in my mind and was thankful to find that there had been no events regrettable enough to make me ashamed of my own life.

"It must have been amusing reading."

"It was very encouraging, I assure you."

I was relieved.

"Well," added the Colonel, "we had checked up on you from other sources and realised that John was correct in his surmise. We then decided to act and consequently sent you the letter."

"I see," I answered.

There was a brief pause. The Colonel, an understanding man, was in no way forcing me to a hasty decision. Strangely enough, my mind was empty. I felt that I was no longer the same person as he who had entered the War Office. Under the influence of this strange man I had changed. I had no longer a personality of my own but seemed to have allowed this stranger to slip into my mind and direct it. I wanted time to think alone.

"It is all very sudden," I said very tamely.

"Just what the maiden said," laughed the Colonel.

I was stung.

"It will upset my plans."

"You were heard to express at the Embassy Club the other night that the great advantage of the life you lead you never had to make any plans."

"Damn!" I said, then added: "Anyhow, I'd be no good as a spy—agent, I mean. It's too ridiculous!" I tried to laugh but failed.

"Young man," said the Colonel and his tone was now fatherly, "I have had much experience of this sort of work, and know the supreme value of long training. Is it not sufficient that you have managed to convince me that you are capable of undertaking this mission?"

"I see what you mean," I muttered. There seemed to be no way out of it. Now that the first surprise had worn off I began to look at the proposition more closely, and the more I considered it the more it appealed to me. The Colonel was, of course, right when he referred to that inner voice. It had rebuked me often enough, but I had generally managed to quell it. Now that it had been, so to speak, brought out into the open I knew that the task of subduing it would be infinitely harder. What really worried me most in the whole business was my monumental lack of self-confidence, but the Colonel had confidence in me! Surely that was enough.

"Of course," said the Colonel slowly, "I do not wish to force you into anything; we only want willing workers and if you will give your word of honour not to say a word of what has been said in this room the whole matter will be forgotten."

"No," I said very firmly, "I never said I would not do it. I was only doubtful of my own capabilities. If you think I am capable of carrying out the work I am only too willing to help."

"Good!" said the Colonel briskly. "Then that is settled."

"Yes," I said.

"Excellent!" he said. I noticed at once a change in his voice. It was brisk and business-like, and I knew that from now onwards I would have to take and obey his orders. At the same time I realised that all that had gone before had been carefully planned and that the insignificant looking little man behind the desk knew exactly what he wanted and how to get it. I felt happy and confident.

"There are many details to be arranged. Trains, boats, money, means of sending back reports and the rest. We'll arrange all that for you. I want you to go home, pack, and make whatever excuses you think necessary to explain your sudden departure. I want you back here to-morrow morning for final instructions. I need hardly say that no mention of this is to be made. Are you quite clear on that?"

"Quite, sir," I said. "When do I start?"

"Within the next few days," said the Colonel, standing up and going over to the door. "We have not much time left as the war is due to begin in a fortnight's time."

"What?" I gasped.

"Never mind! Forget it! Have a good time and be back here to-morrow. If you take the first corridor on the left you will find a flight of stairs that will lead you to the entrance hall."

The door shut behind me. I walked confidently down the corridor. It impressed me no more. It was dark and dingy. I hit the wall with my stick and cried: "Here's to Anthony Roberts and his new misadventure!"

TWO

VICTORIA — Folkestone — Boulogne — Amiens — Paris — Dijon — Lyons — Marseilles — Toulon — Hyères — Le Rayol — La Foux — St. Raphael — Cannes and at last, thank God, Nice.

The long journey was almost over, the last lap about to begin, and I still had no idea of the nature of the mission upon which I had been sent.

The Mistral, that insistent wind from the Alps, was blowing all along the Riviera, and at Nice it sent the dust flying and the palm trees moaning as it screeched monotonously hour after hour through the crowded streets where the scent farmers and olive growers mixed with the eager tourist or indolent *habitué*.

"Damn!" I thought, as I entered the taxi for the harbour. "A rough crossing!"

There was a crowd of people down by the harbour. They lined the main road and gathered beneath the trees in the square. They were waiting for something. I wondered what it was. I peered up and down the street and saw a van. It was painted bright yellow and had an enormous chromium loud speaker on the roof. It cruised up and down, shouting unintelligible words in a metallic falsetto at the crowd. I tried to pick up what it said but failed. Then suddenly at the far end of the street a regiment came into view. The men in dusty boots and ill-fitting uniforms slouched into view, followed by a line of jingling horse wagons, strange archaic constructions, high off the ground, that shone with spit and polish. So this was the reason for all the fuss? A battalion moving up to the line that faced threatening Italy? But the people were quiet.

A few jokes were exchanged between those who marched and those who watched, but there were no shouts and no cheering. I was puzzled. Then came the stirring in the crowd, a mounting volume of noise that rose to a roar and swept past me along the whole line as, zigzagging in amongst the troops, cheered by soldiers and civilians alike, a solitary racing cyclist, covered in mud, begoggled and crouched low over his handlebars, came pedalling in fierce, swaying jerks up the hill. A cycle race was in progress! Here comes the winner! Rah! Rah! Rah!

I turned away and boarded the *Isle de Beauté*.

We soon weighed anchor and steamed out to sea. As Nice, sitting like a broody hen on her hills, disappeared and as the snow-covered heights of the Alps rose up behind, so did the motion of the ship become increasingly uncomfortable.

The Mistral, as I have said, was blowing. The sea was rough. There was a storm in the Mediterranean and we were ploughing through it. The swaying mast-head raced across the deep, heavy blue of the sky, while the bows cut through the darker hue of the sea, and the screaming wind tore the white smoke away from the funnel and tossed it among the crested waves. People, like frightened spiders in a fibrating skein of wool, clawed their way among the lashed cars and wind vents. So high did the waves sweep that the fourth class passengers were evacuated from the bows and ordered to take refuge among their superior first-class companions. It was worse than the Channel at its fiercest and yet the sun was so strong that it bit mercilessly into exposed face or body.

I am a good sailor, as a rule, but having unfortunately drunken a glass of sickly beer before setting off I felt some discomfort beneath the points of my waistcoat. I

therefore spent most of the time clawing my way ape-like around the almost deserted decks.

It was on one of these journeys that I ran into her—or perhaps I should say slid into her. I had seen her once or twice on the journey out, an attractive-looking, well-dressed girl, who had sat aloof and unapproachable in her seat, reading a new novel most of the way from England. Though I had never so much as spoken to her or even caught her eye I felt that after fifteen hundred miles of reading books at each other we could claim a certain bond of companionship. Consequently when I saw her lose her grip of the rail and come sliding over the wet deck towards me, I shouted urgently. "I say, look out, you'll hurt yourself." It may not have been a very intelligent thing to say, but real people, unlike the characters of a play, cannot keep up an eternal string of clever back-chat. Needless to say my remark had no effect on her and I noticed with trepidation that, if anything, her speed was gathering momentum.

I had to act. With an Englishman's true disregard of his personal safety I launched myself across her path with a frantic shout of:

"Hold on! I'm coming."

I was—and out of control too, for that she-devil of a ship decided at the very moment of my setting out that she had rolled far enough and with a shuddering jar began to right herself. The result was disastrous, for I had launched myself with great force and now losing my balance completely, fell headlong at the girl's feet. She, unable to check herself and waving frantically with both hands, kicked me sharply in the ear, tripped, fell over me and, with me as a human sledge, slid rapidly back to her point of departure.

We managed to cling to a rail sufficiently to prevent

ourselves being borne across the deck when next she rolled, and on her second recovery pulled ourselves to our feet.

"I say, I'm dreadfully sorry," I cried. "Are you hurt?"

"No," answered the girl shortly.

"Have you lost anything?"

"No," she answered again, tightening the tri-coloured scarf at her neck, "but whatever made you do such a crazy thing? Did you lose your balance or your head—or both?"

The tone of her voice was so biting that I was roused to righteous indignation. After all I'd risked my life for her safety and though I might have failed I felt that some consideration should have been paid to my altruism.

"I was trying to save you!" I cried.

"Save me," she snorted, "I was doing it on purpose."

"What, sliding?"

"Yes. I wanted to get over to the rail. That was the best way. I'd have made it before the roll was over if you had not interfered. You've ruined my stockings. Look!"

She turned slightly and pulled up a fraction of her skirt. A long white ladder was running gaily down in the direction of the knee. I am afraid, however, that I was paying more attention to the shape of her leg, for it was one of those legs designed by nature for collaboration with swimming-suits. She must have realised that her spontaneous gesture might be misconstrued, for she pulled her skirt down angrily and stood squarely before me, holding on to the rail for support.

For the first time I studied her with some care. She

was of medium build, slim in her fur coat and very steady on her feet. Her eyes were blue and virginal, her skin soft and white, and her hair, which fell to her shoulders in what I believe is termed the page-boy style, was silky in its fair loveliness. She had a firm little chin that gave character to a face that might otherwise have been too slavishly conventional. To me most girls look alike, and seem to conform to a standard pattern. She was no exception. It was only when closer scrutiny revealed the determined look in her eyes and the hopefulness in the shape of her lips that the difference could be seen. This girl had character and a sense of humour. Of the former I had already had proof in the series of rebukes with which I had been met. As for the latter I was soon to discover its existence, for she suddenly began to laugh with great enjoyment.

I grinned faintly in the manner of those who do not understand the reason for another's mirth; fear that they may be that reason and feel that, in order not to appear a bore, some form of facial expression is necessary.

"Sorry," she laughed. "It is funny, you know."

"I suppose so," I answered gloomily.

"Oh, now don't be angry. It was sweet of you to come to my rescue. I'm sorry if I lost my temper, but ladders always make me angry."

I was about to make some suitable reply when two passengers came hurrying past, a man and a woman of uncertain age.

"Are you certain you can see Corsica?" said the woman.

"Yes, it won't be long now," answered the man. "Come to the . . ." The rest of his words were lost in the moan of the wind.

"Corsica?" cried the girl. "Let's go and see."

Her tone was excited. She was like a child who has been promised a toy. We left the rail and made our way carefully against wind and sun to the forward rail of the first-class deck.

"If we are near," I shouted, "the wind will soon die down."

"Why?" she asked.

"Corsica has her own weather. She scorns the Mistral. She has her own wind."

"How do you know?"

"I've been here before."

"How wonderful!" she cried. "What is it like?"

We had arrived at the rail by now. We clung to it and looked ahead. Though the ship was still rolling as heavily as ever, the seas were quieter. The white horses had vanished. The waves were flatter, more oily, and the horizon was distant and clear.

"There," I said pointing ahead.

Almost above the prow of the ship could be seen a dark smudge on the horizon.

"That is Calvi," I said.

"Calvi!" she whispered.

"Our destination," I explained. "It is a rock sitting on a peninsula. Calvi sits on the rock. The bay stretches round the left and that painted smudge over there is the Monte Cinto. There is always snow on the Monte Cinto, even in August. It's one of the few places in the world where eternal snows are visible from the sea-shore. Even the Riviera cannot boast of such a sight."

"You speak like a guide."

"I should like to be yours," I said gallantly.

She laughed. "Tell me some more about Corsica," she said.

"Later," I said, "when we get nearer. In the meantime tell me something of yourself."

"If you will tell me about yourself," she answered.

"Good!" I cried. "We are in for a long session. My life story is extremely interesting. Let's go to the saloon, there's too much noise up here."

"What about Calvi?" She looked longingly at the smudge.

"We've still two hours to go. There is plenty of time."

So down we went and presently found a quiet corner where no one was being sick, and where the vibrations of the turbines were less pronounced and where all we could see of the Mediterranean was a stretch of sea that rose and fell alarmingly outside a closed porthole.

We had tea and it was over our rattling cups that she told me her story. It was very simple.

Her name was Ann Wheatherton. Her age she did not say, but she had not long come out, and was still at a finishing school. I put her down as nineteen, but she may have been younger. Her life had been pleasant and sheltered, and this was her first visit to the Continent. She was apparently joining her uncle out in Calvi. This uncle was a strange and nebulous creature who led a wild, roaming life on board a yacht. His name was Ned, Uncle Ned Stone. He was very rich and literally had "money to burn" as he was reputed to light his cigarettes with hundred franc notes. He thrived on eccentricities: was officially unmarried but was never seen out of the company of a red-headed woman called Nona, who had been the toast of Paris some years back. As Ann was an orphan and was responsible only to a sleepy old guardian she did what she liked, and having located the whereabouts of this strange uncle had invited herself to join him in his yacht. And here she was.

I then told her the story of my life, or at least that portion of it that I hoped might interest her. The conversation then drifted hither and thither, covering such absorbing topics as the English summer, Hitler and David Niven.

Talking with her was very pleasant for her voice was even and well modulated. Though educated it nevertheless had character, and like the look in her eyes placed her well above the usual run of debs., society hostesses and self-made daughters.

She was, in fact, altogether charming.

So charming in fact, that we crept unnoticed into Calvi, and the first we knew of it was the sight of the purple mountains through the porthole.

"We're in!" I cried. "Come on!"

We raced up on deck, tripping over those prudent souls who, gathering suitcases and bundles, were making for the gangway in order to be the first to slither ashore. We went forward, however, and gazed upon the scene.

Calvi was all around us, colourful, bristling with life and as beautiful as an exotic dream.

"Calvi!" she cried. "Tell me, guide, what are those plants?"

She pointed to the steep slopes of the rock upon which the town was built, and where a dark green foliage hid the red rock.

"Prickly pear," I answered. "Nothing can climb it. Calvi was a fortress town, built by Genoese pirates. You can see the old wall running along the top of the rocks and coming down there by the quay to form a bastion by the tower. Look at the town. Perfect, isn't it? with the church in the middle, at its highest point. Look at the golden cross shining in the sun. On its right is the house in which Columbus was born."

"I thought it was Genoa."

"Ask the Corsicans. They claim both Columbus and Napoleon. There's even a marble slab to commemorate the fact."

"Then there can be no doubt," laughed Ann.

"Exactly. On the left we have the new town," I continued in my best guide's voice.

"Doesn't look very new."

"Calvi ceased to grow two centuries ago—except for the hotels, of course."

"What sweet little balconies on the houses. What are those huts on them?"

"As a matter of fact they are all purpose closets!"

"What?"

"Well, you know what I mean."

"Really? How sweet!"

"Each little hut is one, you can see somebody going in now. Sanitation is very rudimentary here. You have to be careful in the street. They just empty their slops over the side and it runs down the centre of the street. Calvi smells high. You can smell it now."

She laughed. "Look at the palm-trees. I never knew they grew so fat."

"They do here. That is the 'Quay Kitchener,' called after Lord Kitchener who used to bring his yacht here regularly."

There were yachts in now. Large and small. They shone in the sun as they rocked side by side or stood out in the bay tugging at an anchor-line. There was a seaplane, too, sitting like a dull dragon-fly on the calm water.

"Look! Sailors, aren't they?"

A long boat was pulling out across the bay, oars beating in rhythm to the strong pull of white-vested men.

"Convicts," I answered. "There is a naval penitentiary behind the town. A weird mixture here of vice and beauty. Calvi is like an over-ripe pear, rotten and exotically beautiful. Everything is strong here. Love, hate and life. It's like the sunlight. Merciless. By the way, be careful of the Corsicans. Never let one dance with you."

"Why not?"

"You belong to him then. You will see that the men dance together and the women dance together. Only those who belong to each other either by marriage or other ties dance together. They are very hot-tempered, especially if they feel themselves insulted and will whip out a 'stiletto corse' and stick it into your arm-pits for no reason at all."

"You frighten me."

"Good—keep away from them. Keep to your own race and they tolerate you. Interfere and they kill you."

"You're exaggerating."

"Not at all. Case the other day of a Corsican who fell in love with a girl. Her parents did not approve of him, so the son of the house filled him with lead. It's their way of saying 'scram'."

"Very effective. Anything else here?"

"Everything. Smugglers . . ."

"Real ones?"

"Yes. Tobacco and dope mostly. There is no tax on tobacco here. Cigarettes are at cost price, so, of course, it's a good-business to import the stuff here and ship it over to France where you can get a good price."

"But what about the police?"

"Police? Oh, they're all paid off. There is only one thing they hate, and that is progress and civilisation."

"Why?"

" It means more work and they hate work as much as innovations. See that little train puffing along the beach in front of those pine-trees ? It only runs about ten miles but the building of it nearly cost a revolution. The French had to send a whole battalion to protect the engineers who were building it."

" Why ? "

" It was cutting out the mule, taking away its value. The Corsicans looked upon the engineers as robbers, so they shot them and tore up the tracks whenever they could."

" How pleasant. What about the famous bandits ? "

" Not many left. Occasionally a man will take to the *maquis* to escape punishment. However, as everybody is more or less inter-related he is usually supplied by the people in the town and has a very pleasant life. As long as he behaves nobody bothers to look for him. It is the laziest place in the world. It is Calvi. It'll get you like it gets everybody else. Look at these mountains, look at the clouds racing round the peaks, look at the forests, the sea, the beach and just smell the smell."

It was coming off-shore very powerfully now, that dry, voluptuous, tantalising, indescribable and yet never-forgotten smell of the vast *maquis*, that stretched in stunted trees and dry shrubs across the arid plains to the mountains. Putrid, exotic, a thousand blends in one it was everywhere, like the continuous, monotonous cry of the crickets.

The ship was almost stationary now while ropes sailed through the air to be dexterously caught by the crew. We were sidling up to the quayside where rubber tyres dangled to receive the ship's rusty belly. The quay was crowded, for the arrival of the ships from Nice, a twice-weekly event, was a break in the even passage

of idle days. They were all there : sad-eyed Corsican girls, lively menfolk, idle tourists, superior yachtsmen, uncouth campers and thin artists. They moved and waved and talked. The jabber of their conversation floated dimly towards us. Their colours contrasted sharply in a living kaleidoscope.

The reception committee was up to its usual standard.

"What about spies?" said Ann suddenly.

I swung round and stared aghast into her blue eyes. Her question gave me a double shock. First it brought back to my wayward mind the fact that I was here on business, and, secondly, it made me wonder what the hell a sweet, if somewhat dumb, girl wanted with agents? (I, too, had abandoned the use of the word "spy" now.)

"Why?" I asked, endeavouring, vainly, I fear, to appear unconcerned.

"You said there were all sorts of people. There must be spies, too."

"I don't know," I replied shortly. "They wouldn't be spies if we knew who they were, would they?"

I looked anxiously at her and at once the thought passed through my mind that perhaps she was in a secret service of some kind. It was absurd, I told myself, but surely not so absurd as the fact that I was one? "Oh dear," I thought peevishly. "I'll never be able to trust anyone again. They're all agents."

I recapitulated my conversation with the girl, fearing I had already given myself away, but as I had temporarily forgotten my mission my conversation had fitted in perfectly with my *role*. Nevertheless, I made a note of keeping a careful check on myself.

"Let's get our bags," I said, meaning, of course, that I would overladden myself with heavy suitcases, get stuck in the gangway, curse, make everybody

impatient with me, and finally slide down onto the hot quayside, sweating and angry to find a porter asking for a tip for the luggage he should have carried. All of which happened, and we found ourselves presently on the quayside looked dazedly at each other.

"Where are you staying?" I asked.

"With my uncle," she replied.

"Where is he?"

"Don't know. He has a yacht."

She looked out across the bay. There were a dozen yachts sitting on the water from a small ship flying the white cross of Switzerland to a two-funnel schooner lying serenely out by the seaplane.

"Which one?" I asked.

"I don't know," she answered puzzled, "I've never seen it."

"Does he drink?"

"My uncle? I expect so."

"We'll find him at Yetty's. Come on."

We left our luggage in the care of an attendant from the Nord-Sud where I was staying and pushed a way through the brown and chattering crowd, past the tower, past the bobbing yachts and the rocky bastion to the thick palm trees that tower above Ignace's bar to the balcony of Yetty's. We passed between thin narrow houses and entered precipitously by a small door. It was dark and cool inside, and relatively empty in the early afternoon. The walls were painted crudely with pictures of Calvi yachts, Calvi houses, Calvi palm trees and Calvi mountains executed by an impoverished Russian in payment of a bottle of vodka, a shirt and a hat. A gramophone was giving vent to the tune "The Three Little Fishes," while through the balcony doors in the background could be seen a curtain of palm leaves and the blue waters of the bay beyond.

Yetty, strong armed and full bosomed, stood behind the bar, whistling "The Three Little Fishes," and shaking a cocktail for a stout fair-haired Englishman, and an attractive woman in trousers.

She caught sight of me and dropped the cocktail shaker.

"Anthony darling!" she screamed. "You're back!"

"Lo, Yetty," I answered.

She issued forth from behind the bar and flinging her heavily scented arms about my neck, kissed me noisily on both cheeks. Then she saw Ann.

"Who is this? No, don't tell me. I know! Your wife! Oh Anthony, why didn't you tell me? Have a drink?"

"This is Miss Wheatherton. She is looking for her uncle, a Mr. Stone."

The Englishman and his wife were beaming at us in the cheerful inconsequential way of cultured people who, though not included in a conversation, feel something is expected of them. My interest, however, was centred on the man who now leapt up from a table of a poker-school in the corner by the window. He was a fat fellow with the repulsive face of one who has indulged too much in too many vices too often.

"Looking for Mr. Stone, miss?"

"Yes," said Ann.

"I know 'im," said the other.

"How nice for you both," said Ann.

"Everybody knows Ned Stone," cut in Yetty.

"Guess you must be his niece," said the man.

He looked thoughtfully at her and nodded his head appreciatively.

"Wal," he drawled at last, "he'll be along, shortly.

My name's Vernon Rudge, Vernon D. Rudge ; I'm touring Europe waiting for this little war of yours to start."

Whereupon Mr. Vernon D. Rudge grinned amiably upon us both and returned to his poker-school.

"A drink?" I asked Ann. "Yetty overcharges but has ice, a distinct advance on The Little Corporal run by Ignace, her rival downstairs."

"Brandy and soda?" asked Yetty happily.

"Two," I answered; then to Ann, "Or would you like an aqua-viva? It's the local killer."

"Catch!" said the Englishman, suddenly coming to life and throwing a plate at me. I caught it with some difficulty and handed it back to him. He laughed uproariously.

Yetty pursed her lips. "He's broken three plates already to-day. Can't you stop him?"

"Me? I don't know him."

"He's a doctor. Very nice man, but will throw plates."

The Englishman continued to laugh.

"Aqua-viva," he cried throwing a plate at Yetty.

"You're as bad as Toby," she cried crossly, as she caught the missile with difficulty.

I remembered Toby, a well-dressed man in white who brought gramophone records and cash to Yetty.

"Where is he?"

Yetty pointed to the floor in disgust.

"Gone over to Ignace," she snorted.

"Very wise, too," grinned the Englishman winking at Ann. "He only charges a franc for an aqua-viva; this old she-devil rooks you for five."

"I'll fix him," snorted Yetty, and turning to me said: "Put on that record, 'I get along without you

very well,' and open the window. He'll hear it and understand."

I changed the record and as I did so said casually :
"Is John still hanging about ?"

"John ?" asked Yetty. "Do you mean John Buckingham ?"

"That's it," I assured her.

I sensed a change in atmosphere immediately. It was as if somebody had made a tactless remark about a deceased husband in the presence of a new widow. I wanted to swing round and read the faces for a reason of the oppressive silence, but I continued to change the record.

Then Yetty spoke. "He's about somewhere," she said. The poker-players brightened.

"Still staying at the Nord-Sud ?" I asked.

"No. He has a flat next door."

"Oh. Nice chap I seem to remember. Is he still writing ?"

"Yes," said Yetty awkwardly. "Here are your drinks," she added in a brighter tone.

I found Vernon Rudge standing by the bar. The poker players looked peeved.

"You know John ?" he drawled.

"I met him when I was here last May. We compared notes as one writer to another."

Was it my imagination or did I notice a fleeting look of relief in the other's eye ? It is so easy to spot the villain in a novel, but in real life it is, to me, almost impossible.

Rudge returned to his table.

"Who are they ?" I asked Yetty nodding to the table.

"Philips you know."

"The gangster ?" I asked.

"Retired," she laughed

Philips was a strange character. He was reputed to have run a joint in San Francisco and to have dead men to his credit. He had blue, child-like eyes that were never still, and a quick pleasant smile as thin as an icicle.

"And the others?"

"Count Boris Bouganoff and Vserolov. They run the night club up in the town. They play here every day. Then, of course, there's Rudge who pretends to be an *Américan*."

Boris was thick and handsome with curly hair. Vserolov thin and miserable. He looked like a wet umbrella. Boris was gaily dressed in pale blue and rust, Vserolov in dark striped trousers and short coat. They were immersed in their game.

"What about a bathe?" said the Englishwoman presently. She was a good-looking girl with dark eyes and darker hair. She wore pale grey trousers and a striped jumper.

"The beach or the rocks?" asked her husband.

"Rocks. We can spike then," she added in a meaning tone.

I took sudden interest. What did she mean? Spike? A code word?

"Fish!" laughed the Englishman as if in answer to my thought. "Don't look so puzzled," he added. "Catch."

And another plate sailed towards me.

I almost missed the catch for the door opened again and a fat man in a clean, white suit tumbled in.

"How are yer?" he nodded to Yetty.

He was followed by a slim woman with red hair, upon whose face the lines of vice and drink were heavily cut.

Vernon Rudge leapt up.

"Your niece," he cried.

"Where is she?" cried the fat man, beaming at the pseudo-American.

"Right here!"

Ann walked forward cautiously. "Are you . . . are you Mr. Stone?" she asked.

"Yep! that's me. Uncle Ned! So you're Ann! How are yer?"

He flung out a thick hand.

So this was Uncle Ned! He did not come up to my mental picture of him, but then so few of my mental pictures proved right. Besides being fat he had no hair at all, nor eyebrows for that matter. His head glistened in its pink nudity and folded itself in layers on to his collar. His eyes were clear and blue, his jowl heavy with a small pouting mouth in it. His hands were clean, with nails freshly manicured.

"Meet Nona." Uncle Ned waved to his companion.

Her great mouth broke into a smile of golden teeth. She shook her red hair and extended a thin hand to Ann.

"Pleased to meet yer," she muttered.

Ann seemed displeased. The contrast between her neat breeding, and the coarseness of her relatives was starting. She seemed disappointed in them.

Said Uncle Ned: "We wanted you to stay with us in the yacht."

"That would be lovely," said Ann.

"Unfortunately we are full up. Besides it's no place for a girl. Boring, you know. Nothing to do. So I've reserved a room for you at the Nord-Sud. Lovely view. You'll like it. Plenty of young people. Care to come along? I'll take you there."

He slammed a panama on to the baldness and looked suddenly normal and even genial.

"Nice girl," he said appreciatively. "We'll become great friends. Got any luggage? The chauffeur will look after it."

"It's down by the quay," said Ann.

"Good. We'll fetch it. Good-bye all." He nodded cheerfully and made his exit.

Ann smiled hopelessly at me.

"See you at dinner," I laughed.

"Who's that?" grunted Uncle Ned turning round as he reached the door.

"Mr. Roberts," replied Ann. "We crossed together."

"Good work, Ann!" beamed the little man. "No need to worry about you, I see."

.

There was something of an anti-climax after their departure. The room seemed dulled, the inmates of no importance. Even Yetty lost much of her sparkle and washed glasses in absent-minded abandon.

"Catch," cried the Englishman urgently. I braced myself, but no plate came sailing through the air. The Englishman burst into a fresh roar of laughter, then cried:

"Have a drink?"

"Thanks," I said.

"What's yours?"

"Brandy-and-soda."

"The last resort. Yetty," he cried, "a brandy-and-soda and two aqua-vivas. You'll have another, Diana?"

His wife nodded.

Yetty poured out the drinks.

"Introductions, please!" grinned the Englishman.

"I don't know the young man."

"Dr. and Mrs. Frant—Mr. Anthony Roberts."

"Any relation of John Roberts?" cried Frant.
"Up at Oxford with him."

"Roberts is quite an ordinary name," I answered.

"Of course, old man, I just wondered. John was a great friend of mine. Now dead, silly fool. Well, here's to us, bungho!"

He drank. I studied him. He was tall, big and fair. He had a strong pleasant face, very blue eyes and a quantity of fine, almost golden hair.

"Bathe," he shouted. "Come on, Diana, the water has been waiting long enough. See you later, Mr. Roberts, until then—catch!" He threw me his hat, a soft panama, while his wife apologised profusely and explained that doctors off duty were like overgrown children.

They trailed slowly out, sure of step as is the way of English people on the Continent.

The poker-players remained unmoved.

"I could kill that man at times," muttered Yetty.
"Breaks everything. However, he spends well."

She washed out a few glasses.

I had another brandy and set out to find John Buckingham.

Following her instructions I turned left in the high street and presently came upon a small door in the uneven walls. Having carefully avoided a naked child eating a large onion, I knocked loudly. There was no answer. I pushed open the door and found a dark passage leading to an open room at the far end.

"John!" I called. There was still no answer.

I walked into the flat. It was a strange place. It consisted of two rooms which were really one, for the dividing line was merely an archway. The walls were heavy, and the whole place looked like a converted

wine-cellar. In the first room stood a large bed upon which was flung a tiger-skin while on the floor by the bed was a further skin, that of a polar bear. A chair held an untidy assortment of men's clothes, flung carelessly down while changing. On the opposite side of the room stood a wash-basin with a basin half-full of dirty water. Beyond was the other room, comfortably furnished in a mixture of styles. Wicker screens, rush mats and Moorish ornaments contrasted vividly with deep armchairs and a heavy chest-of-drawers. In the centre of the room stood a plain table with a typewriter, an untidy pile of papers, a few letters and the remains of breakfast for one on it.

Of John Buckingham himself there was no sign.

I was disappointed. I wanted to see him very badly, for I wanted to know, now that I had reached Calvi, what I was supposed to do. My present ignorance was a danger, not only to myself but to Buckingham as well. I may have already missed a clue or given myself away. What was I looking for? What was the nature of my work? How much had Buckingham accomplished? Where had he begun? Where should I begin?

These questions and many others filled my mind as I stood in the flat, and I began almost unconsciously to turn over the papers, in the hope of finding a clue. It was my business, after all, to be inquisitive.

I was disappointed again, for there was nothing but the script of his unfinished novel. I noted with amusement that it had not progressed by one page since May.

I had almost given up hope when I picked up a sheet of paper covered with names and doodles. The list must have given John Buckingham much to think about, for some were crossed out and others were followed by question marks. I looked down the

column. Some of the names were familiar, for all the *habitués* of Calvi were there, and two names new to me : Smart and Tchistovsky.

At the bottom of the page was a note. It ran, " See Madame François." It was underlined three times.

Who was Madame François ? And why did John attach such importance to her ? I decided to find out for myself. In a small place like Calvi everybody knows everybody else. A few questions would soon lead me to Madame François.

Leaving the flat I turned left and soon found myself at the General Store where American cigarettes are cheaper than postcards. I walked in.

" Packet of Camels," I said to the shopkeeper.

As he went to the glass-panelled door of the cupboard I asked : " Who is Madame François ? "

He looked at me blankly as if he had not understood my question, but his wife, standing gravely beside him, watching him find my cigarettes, said brightly :

" You want Madame François ? You are English ? "

I nodded.

" All English want her. You, too, want to know the future ? I do not believe it. It is rubbish Madame François tells. She makes much money. You will find her in the little red house by the Calvi Palace."

" Here are your cigarettes," said the husband.

I paid ; thanked them both and left the shop.

The Calvi Palace was the biggest hotel in the town. It stood on the farther edge of the new Calvi by the railway station and a little back from the beach. It was a big, thin hotel and because of its size attracted the greater portion of the tourist trade.

I found the house without any difficulty. It was small and neat. A stone and iron staircase, reminiscent of a fire-escape, led up to the first floor, at the door of

which played three dirty children. They stopped their game and stared intently at me as I stood uncertainly below.

"Madame François?" I asked.

"Up here, first door on the left," said the eldest child, obviously accustomed to such questions.

I mounted the stairs and found the first door on the left. I knocked. The door was opened by yet another child with dark hair and a thin consumptive face. He sucked a pencil. He looked enquiringly at me.

"I am looking for Madame François," I said.

"She is out," said the urchin. "If you like to stay she will attend to you when she comes back."

He, too, was used to visitors. He stood back and let me in. The room was small and overcrowded. Besides a bed and the usual paraphernalia of a drawing-room-cum-living-room it was full of those weird objects so dear to the fortune-teller. There was a stuffed bird of ominous mien, three glass bowls, three or four packs of cards of normal size and one of extraordinary size upon whose face was a series of crude pictures. I picked one up at hazard. It represented two Roman soldiers busily slaughtering each other on a sandy battlefield littered with corpses!

"What does this mean?" I asked the child.

He gazed solemnly at the card.

"You are a soldier," he said. "Soon you will be on a battlefield fighting for your life. Many of your friends are dead. You, too, come near to death. Take another card."

I took one. Just a bunch of crossed sticks.

"Bad," said the child. "Take another."

More crossed sticks.

"Worse!" cried the child happily. "Another."

Before I could the door was suddenly flung open

and a man came running into the room. He was panting heavily. His wild eyes shone extravagantly, his untidy hair flopped over his eyes.

"Where is your mother?" he shouted to the child.

The child nodded laconically to the next room.

"Martha! Martha!" cried the man in a loud voice.

A big woman in black came running into the room.

"What is it?" she cried.

"Your sister... Madame François... she is dead!"

The woman screamed. The child stared thoughtfully at the grown-ups. I leapt to my feet.

"Dead?" I cried. "How? When? Where?"

"On the beach... just now... sunstroke!" cried the man.

"Take me to her," cried the woman. "It's not possible, not possible." She drew a shawl about her head and with her slippers flapping on the wood, ran out of the room. The man and I followed hastily.

The child came running out after me.

"Your hat," he said. "She drew the death card this morning," he added and without another word this strange, unmoved infant returned to his deceased aunt's room.

A small crowd of bathers and two or three grave-faced Corsican women told us where the body was lying. As we approached a policeman in blue uniform and black gaiters was pulling off his collar and tie because of the heat. His companion, a fat, red-faced man who seemed about to burst out of his uniform, was busy with note-book and pencil. I edged near to him hoping to hear something of interest. He was only taking the particulars of a young Russian who, in his haste to rescue the woman, had run on to the beach in nothing but a towel! I moved away and looked at the corpse.

It was naked. It looked heavy and useless. It was half buried in the soft sand as if desirous of going back to earth as soon as possible. The face was purple, the eyes staring, congested and cross-eyed. A little blood and some foam were on the lips.

Somebody threw a few sacks over it and a little man in black who had been kneeling by it stood up.

"Well, doctor?" asked the policeman who had removed his collar and tie by now.

"Death was due to congestion brought on by sunstroke. You can take the body away as soon as you like."

He brushed the sand from his knees and prepared to move away. I caught up with him.

"How long has she been dead?" I asked.

"Only a few hours, if that," he answered. "*Rigor mortis* has not set in yet."

"How did it happen?"

"Imprudent sunbathing."

"Isn't that strange for a woman of the Island?" I asked.

The doctor pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"Yes," he admitted, "it is. I never saw her either bathe or sunbathe; she generally slept during the heat of the day; the *siesta*, you know. She was lazy. I wonder what made her change her habits."

"You think she must have received a sudden call and run out into the midday heat without a hat?"

"Possibly."

"But, if that is the case why has she been found in the sea?"

"She may have had the stroke and fallen into the sea."

"Rather a coincidence, don't you think?"

"It could happen and it did!"

"Another thing. Surely a woman who has lived here all her life is immune from sunstroke?"

"Nobody is."

"One more thing: how does the current run from here?"

"Current?"

"She has been dead a few hours. If she had collapsed on the beach somebody would have seen her fall. She must have fallen in from a more secluded spot and been brought here by the current."

"I see what you mean. The current flows in from the direction of the Nord-Sud and then round the bay."

"Then she must have been walking about those rocks."

"Possibly. I do not see why you are so interested."

"Author's curiosity. There is a poignancy in the sudden death of a fortune-teller. Who knows but she may not have foreseen it in her cards and committed suicide to avoid it!"

The little doctor looked at me as if he thought that I, too, had a touch of sunstroke, pursed his lips impatiently, shrugged his shoulders and hurried away down the soft sand like a small cockerel looking for a hen.

I looked at the body again. Strange that the woman whom John Buckingham wanted to see so badly was now dead. Death seemed natural enough but one or two of the details were puzzling. What was it that had made this woman break the routine of a lifetime and ignore a precaution that must have seemed second nature to her? Again, what was she doing on the rocks by the Nord-Sud when she never bathed? Why did John Buckingham, engaged in Secret Service work, want to see her? Had she gone out to meet him?

If so, where was he now? Yes, where was he? I should have run into him by now.

It was worth probing a little further into the fortune-teller's death. I was not quite convinced that everything was as simple as the doctor had said. A stroll around the rocks behind the Nord-Sud might give me the answer I was looking for.

As I walked towards the rocks another thought came to me, and acting on its impulse I went back again to her house. The grave-eyed boy was still there.

"When did Madame François leave here?" I asked.

"Early this morning," said the boy surprisingly.

"Early? Didn't she come back for lunch?"

"No."

"Did she leave in a hurry?"

"No."

"She didn't appear agitated or upset?"

"No, she only went out to shop."

"To shop!" I cried. "Did she wear a hat?"

"Of course!" said the child derisively. "She was frightened of the sun and never went without a hat or shawl. She took a basket, too," he added gratuitously and condescendingly. "To put the vegetables in," he added, as if he thought so little of my intelligence as to expect another query.

"Thank you," I said and left him.

My mind was in a turmoil. The facts did not fit. The woman had left calmly to shop in the morning, properly dressed to face the strong sun and yet was found in the late afternoon dead from sunstroke on the beach. Where was her hat? Where was her basket? The sea had probably taken them both as it had taken her clothes. But if she was wearing a hat (and there was no reason to suppose that she had lost it on the way) how had she been smitten with sunstroke?

I gave it up and hurried instead up the road, past the trees where a game of bowls was in progress and, leaving the long concrete body of the Nord-Sud on my right picked a careful way down among the rocks.

I don't know what I expected to find, perhaps John Buckingham in person or the missing basket. I found nothing, however. The calm blue of the Mediterranean spread in an unbroken plane to the horizon.

The water was very clear. The fish that the doctor and his wife loved to spear swam sedately to and fro against a background of coloured rock and sea flowers.

Lost in a day-dream I almost failed to hear the trickling of sand on rock that comes when either is displaced. I looked round sharply at the rocks behind me. There was nothing in sight. I clambered hastily up over the hot stones until the town came into sight again. I looked down the road. It was almost empty in the glare of the sunshine. I wondered whether I had imagined the sound.

Then down among the trees I saw a figure moving rapidly. I recognised it at once as Vserolov, the Russian from the night club, the poker player, the man under whose name on the list John had drawn a thick line, and with a feeling of sick excitement I saw that he was carrying a straw shopping basket !

THREE

THE shock of my discovery was so great that for a moment I was "bereft of all movement," a peculiar and extremely unpleasant sensation. Then I came to with a start and with a great cry of "Stop him!" I careered down the street towards the man. The

sudden rupture of the peaceful Calvi atmosphere by my vociferous shout startled a mule into an agitated trot, made the Nord-Sud visitors turn round in alarm and even interrupted the political argument of the men in the pub on the corner. I ran on indifferent to the sensation I was creating. Vserolov, hearing the shout, looked round. I shouted again. Instead of running away, as I expected him to do, he stopped still and, turning towards me, awaited my arrival in polite amazement.

I came to a dusty standstill in front of him.

"Where did you get that basket?" I cried, pointing to it.

He lifted his eyebrows in surprise.

"This?" he said easily. "At the stores. If Monsieur desires one he can easily purchase one for himself. It only costs twenty sous."

His words cut my enthusiasm dead. I felt the fool I must have looked.

"Has Monsieur lost his basket?" asked Vserolov.

"No. What do you use it for?" I asked.

"Shopping," said Vserolov, with a smile. "I am a bachelor, and, alas, have no woman to do the shopping for me."

"Oh!" I said, now at a complete loss.

"If Monsieur would care to come with me I can show him the shop."

"No thanks," I said shortly.

"Good day, Monsieur."

He walked jauntily away, leaving me standing beneath the trees cursing myself for being such a fool. If the basket really had belonged to the dead woman then my outburst could only have warned the Russian, and if he were indeed up to some funny business then my actions must have placed me under suspicion. As

a beginning to a life of Secret Service work I was not doing so well.

A voice broke into my thoughts.

"Would you like a lift into Calvi?"

I looked round and saw in the road beside me one of Ignace's big touring cars, and in the car, surrounded by luggage, sat Ann Wheatherton.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Calvi," she answered. "Jump in."

I did so and the car moved forward. As we passed him Vserolov waved amicably to us. Ann smiled back. I scowled.

"Are you leaving?" I asked, looking at the luggage.

"No," she cried in great excitement, "I'm taking a flat!"

"Why?"

"Isn't it thrilling?"

"Is it?"

"All on my own. It has a lovely view of the harbour, I am told. Much better than being in a hotel. Uncle Ned arranged it all. He's a nice old man once you have got over the first shock of meeting him. He said he was sure I'd be much happier on my own. More romantic, he said. So he arranged this flat. Isn't he sweet?"

"Where is it?"

"I don't know. In the town. The chauffeur knows. Uncle Ned is there already."

The taxi in the meantime had reached Calvi and nosed its way carefully between the tall houses of the high street, passed Yetty's and stopped by a small door, which I recognised at once. So this was Calvi's idea of a block of flats?

Uncle Ned came towards us.

"Here we are!" he said. "Let me show you in."

He threw open the door and walked straight into John Buckingham's flat! Ann and I followed.

"Well?" said Uncle Ned.

"But this . . . I cried in amazement.

Ann, however, interrupted my cry of astonishment by saying:

"Uncle! How perfectly sweet!"

I stared about me, hardly able to believe my eyes. This was the same flat. Of that there was no doubt. The bed was the same, the furniture, the archway, the living-room beyond, all were the same. And yet all was now tidiness where before had been lived-in confusion. No more clothes, no dirty water in the basin, no breakfast cups, no typewriter, no pages, nothing but a tidy flat!

I felt suddenly very weak and sat down with a groan on the nearest chair available.

This was too much. I'm sent on a mission I know nothing about. I am to be given instructions by a man who cannot be found. He lives in a flat that he doesn't live in. A woman who might know something of him dies from sunstroke with her hat on and my only suspect offers to buy me a basket for my shopping!

Fate might have made my first case easier.

• During the course of these gloomy observations, Ann and her uncle were examining the flat like children taking a new toy to pieces.

Ann came past me.

"Tired, Anthony?" she asked.

I shook my head and stood up. "No," I said, "just the sun."

"Don't get sunstroke like that poor woman on the beach," said Uncle Ned.

"What woman?" asked Ann.

"Dunno," said Uncle Ned carelessly. "Everybody

is running down to the beach to find out—according to Ignace."

I looked at Stone thoughtfully. A little cross-examination would do no harm.

"However did you find such a delightful flat?" I asked, as if in astonished admiration.

"Been after one for days. Always thought Ann would prefer a flat to a hotel. Hotel life not suitable for girls. Don't you agree?"

"Quite. Then it suddenly appeared on the market?"

"Told Yetty to keep me informed. Just as we were installing Ann in the Nord-Sud, call from Yetty: flat now available. Gave address. Immediate possession; and here we are!"

It sounded reasonable enough. I knew that if anyone wanted anything in Calvi they turned either to Yetty or Ignace. Where did Yetty hear about John Buckingham's flat becoming vacant? I decided to question Yetty at once and, leaving uncle and niece to continue their tour of inspection, I covered the short lap to the bar.

Yetty was alone, for it was that slack time of the day when people have just finished tea and are not yet ready for their evening drinks.

"Ann Wheatherton is taking John Buckingham's flat, I see," I observed.

"Yes," said Yetty. "It was her uncle's idea. He thinks she'll be safer on her own than in the dubious precincts of the Nord-Sud! A crack at you, Tony darling."

"But doesn't John want his flat any more?"

"He's left."

"What? Calvi?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"This morning apparently."

"How do you know? Did he tell you?"

"I got a note from him telling me that he was off to Ajaccio and that the flat was now empty."

"Have you still got that note?"

"I think so."

"Could I see it?"

Yetty rummaged through a pile of bills, telegrams and notebooks until she found a scrap of paper, which she handed to me. On it was scrawled in pencil:

"Dear Yetty,—Am off to Ajaccio. In an awful hurry. Sorry I couldn't see you. Flat is now empty.

"JOHN BUCKINGHAM."

I turned the paper over but there was nothing on the back.

"Can I keep this?" I asked.

"Of course, Anthony." She looked queerly at me. I laughed. "Guess you'd like to know why?"

"He's a friend of yours?"

"Yes. I want to pull his leg about this," I lied. "He's a stickler for good manners, says you can sacrifice everything but them. He seems to have gone against his own principles."

I hoped the excuse was more convincing than it sounded.

Conversation lagged.

"Tell me," I asked, as I put the paper away, "who is Smart? And who is Tchist-something-sky?" I asked remembering the two new names on John's vanished list.

"James Smart is an Englishman. He lives in a

shack on the Plateau des Anglais. He is a bit crazy ; keeps cats and goats, and dances to the Goddess of the Moon on bright nights. . He also writes articles for a newspaper in London. He hardly ever comes into Calvi."

" And Tchist ? "

" Tchistovsky ? A Russian painter. He lives in a tent a mile down the beach with his half-sister. He's a Yogi, and is a little queer."

" Like everybody here ? "

" That isn't a very nice thing to say of us, Anthony."

" Sorry. Brandy-and-soda, please."

I sipped my drink in an uncertain frame of mind. Should I go to Ajaccio in the hope of finding Buckingham ? Ajaccio was a relatively large town and I had no clue to John's destination. Anyhow had he really gone to Ajaccio ? I was not certain.

" What time did this message arrive ? "

" This afternoon. Just after you left," replied Yetty. " If it had come earlier I could have told Mr. Stone about it when he met his niece, and there would have been no delay."

John Buckingham's message had arrived while I was in his flat. The message said he had gone to Ajaccio, and yet his pyjamas were still in Calvi ! An hour or so later, however, there was no trace of him at all. It did not make sense.

Everything seemed to lead to a dead end. None of the *habitués* were of any use. Perhaps this man Tchistovsky might help. It was worth investigating and the walk along the beach would do me good.

I found the tent after some delay. It was situated on the reverse slope of a dune. A strong fence of maquis screened it from wind and view. Rough steps led up to it from the beach. I climbed up and saw a small

man, with a face like a monkey sitting back on his haunches painting. His canvas was the tent, his subject a stiff St. Michael brandishing a fiery sword. He wore a satin cloth around his middle and had placed on his head a saucepan, with the handle pointing like a stiff pigtail down his back. A few yards away sat a tall blonde woman dressed in a flowery evening gown that clung suggestively to her body. She was busy chopping garlic, carrots, lettuce and tomatoes into a pot of olive oil and lemon.

"Welcome," grinned the man, on catching sight of me. "You are just in time for dinner!"

He did not seem in the least surprised to see me.

He dropped his brushes and, picking up a pail, dashed in an agile fashion down on to the beach, across the shingle and into the sea, where he scooped up a pailful of sea water and returned as rapidly as he had gone.

On arriving back he tipped the sea water into a large pot, placed it over a petrol heater, and then poured in a packet of noodles.

"Always use sea water," he announced with a wise nod of the head.

"Why?" I asked in surprise.

He leapt up from the cooking and, squatting down in front of me, motioned me to do likewise. Then, drawing a bottle of brandy from a pail of water, poured out half a glass for each of us.

"Man," he said, sipping his brandy, "was built to live two hundred and fifty years."

"Was he?" I cried in amazement. "Then why doesn't he do it?"

"Because," said the painter, "he lives on corpses!"

"Corpses?"

"What else are dead animals, eh?"

"How does that shorten his life?"

"He eats decomposed food. It decomposes his flesh, too. It kills him!"

"You are a vegetarian then?"

"Exactly."

"No meat?"

"No animal produce at all. No milk, butter or eggs either. They are the fruits of decomposition. I eat raw vegetables and noodles cooked in sea water. I drink pure brandy and nothing else. I shall live to be over two hundred, I hope. If my mother had not fed me with corpses when I was a child I could have reached two fifty." He said this very seriously.

"But why sea water and why brandy?"

"All other water is impure. Fresh water contains corpses. Only sea water is pure. Besides it economises salt. Brandy? Because I like it."

He laughed uproariously as if this explanation were sufficient.

In the meantime the woman continued to prepare the vegetables. I watched her smooth actions in fascination.

"A lovely woman," said Tchistovsky, following my gaze. "Perfect body." Then aloud: "Take that dress off, Helen."

The woman nonchalantly slipped the dress down and revealed a brown body of such fineness and clean-cut lines that I felt for a moment that here was Pygmalion alive.

"Took me a long time to find her," confided the Russian, "and now I spend my whole time keeping her perfect. The body need not grow old. Two things age it: corpses and sex. We've cut out both. Look at my body. Thin and ugly, because I was reared on corpses, but it has not grown one day older in the last twenty years. No hair, you notice; not one. I pulled them all out one by one."

"Why?"

"Hair decomposes the skin by admitting impurities. Is dinner ready?"

Helen nodded and, pulling her dress over her shoulders, set the pot of noodles in front of us. It was a strange and very pleasant meal. The insipid noodles were a foil to the strongly flavoured vegetables, while the neat brandy, drunk like wine, stimulated appetite and mind.

"There was a corpse on the beach this afternoon," said the painter with distaste. "I hid my face and hurried past it. Such things should be forbidden."

I pointed out that the wretched woman in question had probably not chosen to become a corpse.

"She should never have been on the beach," added the little man irritably.

"Sunstroke may strike you anywhere."

"Nonsense. She died in the hills."

I looked at him in surprise.

"Whatever makes you think that?" I asked.

"I saw her going that way this morning."

"To the hills?"

"To Bonifatio. She never came back."

"How do you know?"

"There is only one road and I was on it all day, painting a line of olive trees by a ruined farm. Bright tones, deep shade, a touch of purple in the foothills. Always make large compositions. People will always buy. The ideal: a line of trees, a farm, a long sweep, hills and a high ceiling. Never fails."

"Tell me more of this woman."

"Why should I? She is nothing now."

"I'm interested. There should be no death here."

"Death is everywhere. It was walking with that woman in the road. She feared it then. It was in her

eyes and she turned her head this way and that as she went towards the hills."

I remembered the child's words concerning the death card.

"She spoilt the view. I was glad when she was out of sight in the *maquis*," added the painter.

"If she didn't reappear weren't you surprised to find her dead on the beach?"

"Not my business. She did it to annoy me. Knew it would upset me, as it has. She shouldn't do things like that. She was evil, casting her net into the future. She knew too much."

My thoughts were racing around this new piece of information.

"Was there much traffic on the road?"

"Much too much. Filled my eyes with sand."

"Can you remember anything in particular?"

"Just cars and carts and bicycles. Much too much."

"Could you recognise any of those cars again?"

"I'm a painter not a mechanic."

"What about the drivers?"

"Never saw them. I hate people. I hid in the *maquis* until they had passed. Why should they spoil my work?"

He drank again at the brandy.

"Only Saint Michael and Helen are my friends."

He nodded at the flap of the tent. The colourful image of the saint stared in round-eyed incredulity at the sea. His coat of mail shone brightly. His fiery sword had a mass-produced look about it.

I glanced at Tchistovsky. He looked angry. If only he could remember something more about those cars. One of them might have been the murderers, for I was now convinced that Madame François had not died

naturally. He would not or could not see the importance of such trivial details.

"Helen," he cried, "that corpse has depressed me. We need drinks, and the company of our fellow-men. I am going to Ignace's."

He dived into the tent and presently returned, attired for the trip into Calvi. He now wore a soft satin shirt, a pair of white linen trousers, sandals and a big straw hat.

"May I come with you?" I asked.

"Certainly," he said, grasping a long stick. "Come Helen."

And so we travelled back to Calvi, I very hot and envious between my lightly clad companions. I tried once or twice to swing the conversation round to the painter's vigil on the road. He was not interested in the subject, however, but told me instead how he hoped Yogism would make up for disadvantages given him by his mother, so that he might perhaps live to be two hundred and fifty after all.

On arriving in Calvi I went to the Nord-Sud and ate a second dinner. This one consisted of roast duck, Corsican wine and cheese, for though wholesome Tchistovsky's meal had left me as hungry as before.

It was past ten by the time I went down to Yetty's. The place was packed. The gramophone was saying something about "getting along without you very well," and Toby, the one-time deserter, was drinking Yetty's health. Doctor and Mrs. Frant were up by the bar, he, very red in the face, telling Toby a long story of a rag up at Oxford, she listening with her patient smile. In their usual corner Philips, Rudge, Vserolov and Boris were playing poker. Next to them at a small table sat Uncle Ned (a little drunk), Nona (a little amorous), and Ann (a little bored). In the middle of the floor

danced a few of the young people from the Nord-Sud and the yachts, while out on the balcony I could see, through the open windows, a young honeymoon couple clasped comfortably in each other's arms.

I danced with Ann. She was pleased to see me.

"I spent the whole afternoon looking for you," she said reproachfully. "Why did you abandon us?"

"You seemed so busy," I lied, "I did not want to get in the way."

"Never mind. You're back now. Isn't it romantic here? Look at the moon."

It was an obvious invitation. I could feel her trembling as we danced. The hot air of Calvi, the palm trees, the new moon over the Monte Cinto were too strong for her. I knew what she was feeling. I led her to the balcony. We looked out across the bay.

"It's beautiful," she whispered. It was. We could just see the range of hills across the water with the eternal snow of the Monte Cinto ghost-like in the moon-glow; the water lapped softly along the three miles of beach, unruffled by the night breeze.

There were lights everywhere: on the swaying yachts, on the quayside, where young couples danced, on the *Isle de Beauté*, due to sail in the morning, and far away in the villages half asleep against the sombre flank of the mountain.

Hollywood could not have improved on it.

Her hand touched mine. It was dry and hot. She was young, beautiful and in love with the night. She wanted to be kissed. It was her right on a night like this. It was very easy. She did not attempt to resist. Her lips were very soft and warm. She was not very good at kissing, but made up in zeal what she lacked in experience. We both felt very happy in that moment.

"Bravo! Bravo!" cried a voice from below us.

We looked down, startled by the interruption.

Tchistovsky was leaping about in the light of Ignace's café, clapping his hands wildly and jumping up and down. Helen stood by gravely watching over him.

"I'm coming up to you," he cried. "Go on kissing. Don't stop. You do it beautifully."

Upon which he vanished with Helen in tow.

"Better go inside," I said.

Ann made up quickly and we danced our way back to the floor. Tchistovsky burst into the room. He was very elated.

"Lovely! Lovely!" he cried, shaking us by the hand. "Beautiful! Just like this!" He turned to Helen and mimicked our embrace. "Romeo and Juliet."

Everyone was watching him, laughing not at our unnatural confusion, but at his antics which were amusing.

"Do it again. Please, yes, please," he insisted, pushing us together. Toby, however, intervened with:

"Have a drink? What'll it be?"

"Brandy. Pure brandy and no dirty water, please." This severely to Yetty, as she poured out the drinks. They climbed on to the high stools at the bar and there she sat very upright sipping her brandy while he talked incessantly to Yetty, Toby and the room in general, about Yogism.

Ann and I danced. Occasionally we heard the excited voice of the painter arguing heatedly some point that nobody contested, but most of the time we were too interested in each other to pay much attention to him.

It was some time later that he came up to us with a doleful expression on his face, and his hat in his hand.

"I am going," he said. "They insult me."

"How?" I asked.

"They have been talking about that corpse. They say she fell into the sea. I tell them no! Didn't I see her walking towards the hills? Didn't I see her not come back? Are my eyes, my painter's eyes mistaken? They say I imagine it. I did not. If only I could remember . . . but I cannot . . . I was not interested, but I saw her walk up the road because she spoiled the view. I am very angry. I go to bed. Come, Helen."

The little man bowed to us and, followed by that beautiful woman, left the room. We all laughed a little and returned to our interests.

Though we did not know it, it was the last time that we were to see them alive. . . .

.

It was not until eleven next morning that I called on Ann at her flat.

I found her busily packing a picnic basket.

"We are going along the beach to-day," she announced.

I agreed avidly. I felt the need for relaxation. I wanted to forget for a few hours the problems facing me here.

Lunch was a success and it was past five before we packed up the picnic basket and turned once again towards Calvi.

We were carrying the basket between us, pushing our feet through the soft sand and talking loudly and earnestly about nothing in particular, when Ann suddenly stopped and, in a frightened voice, cried:

"Anthony! What's that?" She was looking at the sea. I followed her glance. Down on the shore, where the small wavelets broke silently, something,

a big coloured balloon it seemed, was being toyed by the water.

I dropped the basket and raced towards the object. I could hear Ann running behind me. As I approached the swirling waters they receded and revealed a body, a human body—a woman, a brown limbed and beautiful woman—lightly clad in a colourful evening gown. It was Helen. I grabbed at the inert form. It was heavy and cold. It slipped from my grasp, the sullen head with water-plastered hair falling stickily into the sand. I heard Ann moan, behind me. I dragged again and pulled the body out of the water. It lay there, the water dripping away in rivulets back to the sea. She had died in the same way as the fortune-teller. The symptoms were the same. The staring, bloodshot eyes, the foam at the mouth, the congested features, all spelt sunstroke.

“Oh God! Oh God!” moaned Ann.

“Get away from here,” I said angrily, turning round on her. She was not looking any more at the woman at my feet but out to sea. I followed her new glance. A few feet out, just below the surface, face down, floated another body, lazily tumbling in towards the beach.

The small limbs, with the hairless skin, were unmistakable.

“Tchistovsky!” I cried, and wading out propelled the body on to the beach.

They lay together, as if asleep, with the water flowing from them, they who were so alive. I could almost hear the painter shouting: “I’ll live to be two hundred and fifty.” I could see him jumping up and down, waving his hands, on the quay with Helen gravely by his side. This was no accident; there was something evil in this beautiful island, like the sun that killed

beauty as indifferently as it kindled life. A surge of anger against the force that killed these two mounted within me. I felt like choking. I turned to Ann. She was very white.

"I'll kill them," I cried. "I swear I'll kill them."

Ann nodded absently.

"Come away," I said, "we can do nothing for them now."

We shuffled slowly away, eyes staring and unseeing, each immersed in thoughts that ran monotonously on the two bodies drying in the sun that had killed them.

"We'll have to inform the police," I said.

Ann nodded.

Suddenly I hated the sun. It hung so mercilessly strong in the sky. It mocked us. I hated it and with it the shadow it cast, the hard sharp shadow that cut across the land like a knife from the cactus stumps to the mountains on the horizon. I looked at the mountains and felt strangely drawn to them.

There lay the solution. Madame François had walked towards them to her death. Tchistovsky had died talking about this walk of hers. What mystery did the mountains hide? What evil lurked at Bonifatio? Where was John Buckingham? What was my mission? Somehow I knew that there was a key to it all and that key lay hidden in the hills about Bonifatio.

"Anthony," said Ann, of a sudden, "who are they?"

"God knows!" I replied. "Fiends, to murder people like them."

I forgot that Ann knew nothing.

"Murder?" she puzzled. "Wasn't it sunstroke?"

I did not answer. Should I take her into my confidence? I needed help, but could I trust her? How much should I tell her? All or nothing?

In the end I compromised and told her about everything except my mission and my search for John Buckingham. I let her believe that I was taking nothing more than an amateur's interest in the whole affair.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, when I had finished.

"Go up to Bonifatio and find out."

She looked at me with a frightened glance.

"Be careful, Anthony."

"I will, I'm an awful coward. Don't worry."

"How will you go?"

"As a tourist in one of Ignace's taxis."

"Oh good, I thought you would walk."

"I don't see why you are so pleased," I remarked.

"I hate walking."

"You are not coming with me," I retorted very firmly.

"Oh yes I am," she replied calmly. "I am part of your disguise. You and I have been flirting delightfully since we arrived here. What more natural than a romantic trip to Bonifatio? By the way, what is Bonifatio?"

"A collection of fresh water pools formed by melted snow. People go up there to bathe. It is very cool and refreshing," I replied sulkily.

"Excellent. I love bathing in icy pools. When shall we go?"

"You—my sweet—are not going."

"Why?"

"I have no desire to fish you out of the Mediterranean."

She laughed shakily.

"That won't happen to me."

"You are quite right, you're not going."

She would not give up, however, but produced a string of extremely conclusive arguments with great speed. I felt my resistance (never extremely strong against girls of Ann's type) weakening and was finally overcome when she pointed out that, as the niece of so powerful, rich and well-known a man as Ned Stone, the murderer or murderers would, even if they contemplated it, fight shy of anything really drastic.

Knowing that further argument was merely a waste of time, I submitted as gracefully as I could and together we made our way, via the police station, to Ignace's café, the Little Corporal.

.

Bonifatio lies, I suppose, less than ten miles from Calvi, but during those ten miles the traveller is taken into a new world. As Ignace's open car trailed along the road the coast soon fell away to reveal the rugged, boulder-strewn waste of *maquis*, this in turn vanished and gave place to a vista of steep gorges, studded with trees and jagged rocks pointing to the eternally blue sky. The car, so important in the plain, becomes a beetle creeping round the rocks. All is still. Human beings become rarer and rarer, only now and then are rough wooden huts seen nestling to the edge of a precipice and occasionally (very occasionally, for the Corsicans are fundamentally lazy) a wood-cutter is at work, his saw idle while he sleeps in the shade of the doomed tree. A last magnificent glimpse of Calvi is seen. From so high up the town and citadel look like a painted toy set in a sea of blue paper. It is seen through a receding funnel of crags and spires which gives one the weird impression of looking at it down the wrong end of a telescope. A turn in the road and Calvi is gone. The mountains grow more rugged. They

creep in closer to the road. Nothing seems to live there, except an occasional wild mule, scurrying down the hillside.

We reached Bonifatio at last. It was a collection of wooden huts and tables. As we arrived a grave faced woman placed a bottle of wine, and a collection of glasses on one of the tables.

"The pools are up there," said the driver. "I'll come back for you at six."

The taxi turned round and made an easy way towards the coast.

We approached the table gingerly. The Corsican woman smiled encouragingly.

"You must be thirsty," she said. "Drink."

We sat down and the red wine was poured out for us into thin tumblers.

"Water?" she asked.

"No," I answered. "It will spoil the wine."

"The wine is poor, the water is good here. The wine spoils the water."

She placed the jug on the table and, picking up two pails, walked away down the road.

We drank. Then looked at each other.

"What next?" whispered Ann in a sibilant stage whisper that was fearfully loud.

"Don't know," I said. "Ask questions, I suppose."

"Them?" She nodded slightly towards the nearest hut.

There, leaning against the rough wood, were two Corsicans, puffing quietly at huge pipes. They seemed as immovable and impassive as the mountains behind them.

I smiled weakly at them. They ignored me. I was stung. "Have a drink?" I said.

They considered this.

"Yes," they said, and approached us, glass in hand, as if only waiting for this signal.

I poured the wine.

"Water?" I asked.

They looked disgusted.

"The water is bad. It has no iron. It kills you to drink it."

"But the woman said . . ."

"Tourists don't matter," said the tallest, derisively.

"Your health," he added as an afterthought, sipping slowly at his glass.

I felt that now contact had been established it might be judicious to begin my own cross-examination.

"Lovely place," I said.

"Ah," said the smallest and most villainous looking of the two.

"Lonely, though."

"Ah!"

"But I suppose you get many visitors?"

"Ah—Ah!"

"What do they come for?"

"Ah!"

"The water?"

"Ah!"

"Anything else?"

"Ah!"

We were not getting very far.

"What else?" I asked boldly.

"Cocaine," said the tallest laconically.

I gulped.

"There is a lot here?"

"Ah!"

"Who gets it?"

"Aaah!"

They looked at the trees as if to say that it grew on the spidery branches of the pines.

"Have you had many visitors lately?"

The expected "Ah!" was given.

"A Corsican woman?"

There was a silence.

"A Corsican woman with a shawl, about forty, a fortune-teller from Calvi."

"Ah-ah!" an enlightened one this time.

"She came when?"

"Yesterday."

My heart began to beat faster. We were getting somewhere at last.

"Did she come alone?"

"Nah."

"Who was with her?"

They shook their heads.

"A man?"

"Two," they said, "in a car."

"What were the men like?"

They shook their heads again.

"Can't you describe them at all?"

"Nah."

"Were they tall?"

"Ah—nah."

"Small?"

"Nah-ah."

"Dark?"

"Ah—nah."

This was useless.

"Did she leave again?"

They shook their heads.

So that was that. I tried a new angle.

"Did a small man with long hair and white legs,

accompanied by a woman in a long, flowery dress come too ? ”

“ Ah ! ”

“ When ? ”

“ This morning.”

“ Did you see them leave ? ”

“ Nah.”

“ Did they come alone or with the same men ? ”

“ The same.”

After this there was silence.

I sipped pensively at my wine. The trail was clearing. My hunch had been correct. A new thought came to me. John Buckingham, whom I felt was mixed up in all this, might have come, to this spot. I began questioning them again, but it was to no avail. A depressing series of doubtful grunts were all I reaped. I fell again to sipping.

“ He is here now,” said the tallest man vaguely.

I nearly choked, and when I had stopped coughing, I asked : “ Why ? ”

“ He often comes here.”

“ Was he here yesterday ? ”

“ Nah, day before.”

“ Have you ever seen him in company with the men who came yesterday ? ”

“ Yah, often.”

I jumped up in excitement.

“ Where is he ? ” I asked.

They pointed up the road in the direction of the pools.

“ Come on,” I cried to Ann. “ We’re nearing the answer at last.”

We set off at a quick walk up the road, but our pace soon slackened for the road was rough, and the sun very hot. As we turned each corner we expected we

knew not what, something exciting at any rate, but there was nothing of interest to see, nothing but the quiet trees and the broiling rocks.

"This is silly," said Ann.

"I agree," I retorted.

"How far are we going?"

"Just the next corner."

But after that corner there was another, and after that still another, so we went on—hot, ill-tempered and wet with sweat—until we saw on our left a line of pools lying snugly among grey polished rocks. A waterfall of silver droplets and a stream joined each of the pools which were about thirty or forty yards long.

We left the road and scrambled down to the pools. They were very beautiful. The water was so clear that at times it was almost invisible.

"Beautiful," said Ann in some disgust. "But hardly helpful. What next?"

"A rest," I replied.

There was a ledge above the biggest pool. We climbed up to it. We lay down. It was dangerously peaceful there. The strong wine, the warm sun and the heavy stillness overtook us. We felt sleepy. Ann wriggled closer to me and laid her head on my shoulder.

"Wake me when the murderer arrives," she mumbled sleepily.

She closed her eyes. I watched her as she lay there. She was very desirable. To hell with murders and spies, and all the complications of life, I thought. Here I am in a romantic spot with an attractive girl and instead of busying myself in the natural way of young men with girls, I must belabour my poor mind with endless conundrums for which there seems to be no answer.

Some time passed in this manner, and I had begun

to grow restless and wonder whether Ann were really asleep or not when I began to sniff suspiciously at the air. A faint smell of burning had reached me. I sat up.

"What is it?" asked Ann, drowsily.

"Smell of burning," I replied.

She sat up and sniffed.

"Yes," she answered. "What is it?"

"A fire," I answered fatuously.

We stood up, peering here and there. There was no sign of a fire, but nevertheless the faint smell of burning still pervaded the air.

"It is coming from there," I said, pointing to the buff of scrub and trees above our heads.

"Let's see what it is," replied Ann.

We began climbing and as we did so the smell of burning became more intense until on reaching the top of the knoll we saw a thin column of smoke, rising up into the clear air.

"Your fire!" laughed Ann.

We walked forward again, now on the flat, and of a sudden saw the land sloping down again away from us towards the column of smoke. We pushed on eagerly, intent on discovering the reason for the fire. I was a little ahead of Ann, so that when with a startling rapidity a full view of the scene in front of me was laid bare, I stopped so suddenly that she bumped into me.

"What?" she began.

I motioned her to be quiet and to kneel down. She did so, and peering eagerly around my arm saw what I, too, saw.

Below us was a hollow. The sides were covered in scrub and small stunted trees whose branches were outflung in all directions. The hollow itself consisted mainly of a large slab of rock, that slanted gently

southwards, but what had held our attention was the sight of a thin man in a black suit bent diligently over the fire.

It was Vserolov !

He was throwing objects into the fire, and it was the recognition of these articles that had made me crouch down so suddenly. I watched fascinated as in quick rotation Vserolov threw on to the mounting blaze, all those clothes and papers that I had seen in John Buckingham's flat. As each article fell on to the flames the fire grew, and I stared in fascination as sheets, paper towels, hats and letters fluttered to the flames.

"Look," I whispered. "Tchistovsky's hat."

It, too, fluttered into the blaze along with a shawl that a Corsican fortune-teller might fancy and Helen's straw *sombrero*.

"What are all those books ?" whispered Ann.

"I'll tell you later," I answered.

We stared again as Vserolov, now warming to his work and obviously anxious to finish it quickly, seized a large suitcase, which I remembered seeing in John's bedroom, opened it and emptied its entire contents bodily into the blaze. The result was startling. The fire, as if overcome by the sudden burden died, then gathering new strength, sprang into such violent life that Vserolov backed away from it, shielding his face from the blaze.

"If he isn't careful . . ." I began, but before I could finish the sentence the fire did the very thing I was about to predict. Vserolov had not been too careful in the choice of a site. It was too near the *maquis* scrub that separated him from us. The renewed blaze spread suddenly to a small bush which flared up in a shower of sparks to a height of five feet. This was immediately followed by another bush and another,

until within a few seconds ten square yards of *maquis* was ablaze. Vserolov seemed suddenly frightened. Picking up a branch he began to beat madly at the flames. His puny efforts were useless. The flames spread. The clouds gathered in strength and began to roll lazily above the flames.

The Russian was becoming frantic now. The fire had become serious. A tree had gone up. The flames seemed to leap straight up the trunk and burst into a firework display at the top. Sparks and cinders began to fall about us. Another tree screamed to destruction, writhing and struggling with the licking foe.

Vserolov, half hidden in smoke, had stopped his useless flaying. He stood watching the blaze in fascinated horror. Then, as the whole *maquis* seemed suddenly to burst into fire, he ran hurriedly away, casting now and again a terrified look behind him.

"Pah," said Ann derisively, "what's the hurry?"

The hurry soon became apparent, for now that the *maquis* was well ablaze it began to move fanwise in a strange manner. We gazed in fascination. A wall of flame some six feet high with here and there volumes of higher heat advanced with extraordinary rapidity round the edge of the rock, and then, as if with a definite purpose in view, it began running up the hill towards us.

"Look out," I shouted, as the crackling enemy belched at us. We leapt up and began running away. At first we ran at a dignified trot, but as the fire behind us gathered speed and strength we broke into a panic scramble.

The way back seemed infinitely long, the obstacles grew larger and more treacherous, the heat of the fire swept over us and scorched our backs.

We were very out of breath by the time we arrived at

our ledge, and there we saw something that brought us to a halt. The fire, by a rapid turning movement, had outflanked us to the right and had almost reached the road we were making for. No wonder Vserolov, with his knowledge of such *maquis* fires, had fled so hurriedly.

We looked at each other grimly.

"What now?" shouted Ann above the roar of the furnace.

We looked at the pool beneath us. How cool and calm it seemed. How inviting.

"Jump," I said. "Jump and make for that overhanging rock by the waterfall. We'll be all right there."

We jumped. It was a long jump. The water closed over our heads and we sank without resistance to the deep translucent bed. The cold water knocked all the breath out of my body. As I came up to the surface a large cinder crashed and sizzled to smoke by my side. I saw Ann, her sodden dress clinging to her figure, swimming strongly for the waterfall. I followed. We were just in time. Hardly had we ducked under the watery protection than the fire devoured the ledge and like a monkey swinging from branch to branch, swept over our heads. We shivered from cold and fear. Pieces of burning wood fell about us and once or twice we had to duck to cool our faces from the intolerable heat, while gusts of choking smoke threatened to smother us out like rats.

For three quarters of an hour the fire crackled above and around us, although the leading flames had long since swept beyond us.

At last it seemed safe enough to abandon the icy protection of the water, and with shivering limbs and numb fingers, we crawled on to a flat rock in mid-stream.

Here we dried and warmed ourselves as best we could, and when once again capable of moving freely, turned our attention towards the distant road.

With the help of the water, and by leaping with the agility of the proverbial cat on hot bricks, we managed to make the road, and soon neared the huts of Bonitatio, which by some miracle had escaped the effect of the fire.

We limped to the table, footsore, weary and smelling of burnt cinders.

The Corsicans eyed us in amazement.

"Thought you were burned," said the tallest laconically.

"You'll be needing a drink," said the woman comfortably. "Piedro, fetch the wine."

Piedro grumbled, so the calm faced woman (was she sister, wife or mistress of all or any of them, I wondered) did it herself. The wine, the food and the warm sunshine soon restored us and we began to giggle stupidly, and talk in loud, hysterical voices, until the sun began to go down and Ignace's taxi came up the mountain road.

The driver was happy to find us alive. He had seen the smoking trail of the fire and had wondered if it had touched us. He had almost not come up to fetch us, fearing that a turn of the wind might sweep the fire back across the road, but Vserolov had roared into Calvi with definite and reassuring news about its direction. He had, therefore, decided to risk the journey, though he was in a hurry to get back. Forest fires were worse than angry women, he asserted; he should know as he had very unwisely married the angriest of all angry women.

This mention of Vserolov brought the purpose of our visit to mind.

"Did you tell him we were here?" I asked.

The driver looked surprised. "I said that I had some tourists in the hills," he remarked.

"You did not mention our names?"

"I do not know them," said the man, opening the door for Ann. "Let us hurry, pliss?"

I turned to the woman and asked how much we owed her. She shook her head gravely and said: "Nothing." The two Corsicans nodded and gave me a smile.

"But I must pay you for the wine," I said.

"It is nothing," they said. "Nothing at all."

They continued to smoke and to sip their wine. "Hurry, pliss," said the chauffeur again. Further persuasion was useless. I clambered in beside Ann and sank thankfully back on the hot leather seats of the open tourer.

FOUR

THE next day, Sunday, the 25th of August, was as warm as ever, and after sleeping comfortably, bathing and generally putting away the effects of the shocking events of the previous day, Ann and I met on the quay at tea-time.

We did those things expected of us, even to flattering Kiki, Ignace's tame boar, as he fought the mongrels. We walked up and down as everybody else was doing and listened to the odd scraps of their conversation.

The usual flow of inconsequential subjects had given way that day to something graver and words like Dantzig, Poland, Hitler, Chamberlain and Chasseur Alpins, mingled uncomfortably with the tall palm trees and the lapping of the placid Mediterranean wavelets.

The news from the mainland had been troubling.

Calvi affected to ignore it, but it hung about like a bad smell, and carefree sun-brown faces would grow serious until a shrug of the shoulders or a quick jest turned the conversation into more profitable paths.

Growing tired of walking, we came to a halt by the water's edge, in front of the Little Corporal. The crowd passed to and fro like mannequins on duty. Behind them in the café we could see Vserolov and Rudge sitting together at one table, while Nona and Uncle Ned sat at another.

"Just like being on location!" I exclaimed.

"What?" asked Ann.

"Might be a set. Perfect. The crowd walking aimlessly about; the principals at their seats; the character studies, Ignace and his little maid Emilienne, busy in their menial work and . . . look! There is Yetty on her balcony above the Little Corporal to give the local touch and sing perhaps an aria!"

Instead of an aria, however, Yetty sang out:

"Come and have a drink, Tony?"

It was her eternal love-call.

"Damn it," I cried, "it is a set, a frame up, call it what you like, but there's something very artificial here. Nobody is what they appear to be. They're all crooks, every one of them."

"All?" cried Ann anxiously. "Even Uncle Ned, the sweet old thing?"

"I don't trust anybody," I replied.

"Not even me?"

"Not even you, my darling," I laughed gaily.

Though I said this in a bantering tone of voice, it was nevertheless true. I could trust nobody. It was an unpleasant feeling. The only person with whom I could speak in complete confidence was John

Buckingham, and he was as illusive as bananas in war-time.

I shrugged my mental shoulders, took stock of the position and realising that Vserolov was a sinister beacon in the maelstrom of conflicting events, I decided to follow him and await developments.

It was with this thought in mind that I turned to Ann and said :

"To-night we'll go dancing."

"Where ? " asked Ann.

"The Citadel. That is where Vserolov works. He may lead us to something."

"Shall we tell the police ? "

"All we have are suspicions. Nothing concrete."

"What about Vserolov burning those clothes yesterday ? "

"Our word against his. We have no proof. If that fire had not started we might have retrieved some of the articles."

"Even so our suspicions would put the police on the alert."

"My dear," I said sententiously, "you do not know the Corsican police. If there is some funny business they are probably in it, so they would hardly help us. Anyhow their motto is '*laissez faire*.' They'll do anything to avoid trouble."

"Sorry I spoke. You needn't bite my head off. I was only trying to help," said Ann ruefully.

"You do. You are," I cried.

"An invisible cloak ? "

"A first-rate excuse for putting my nose into places that do not concern me : for example the Club to-night."

"I'm sure I shall look very guilty."

"I hope not."

"I shall talk out of the corner of my mouth like this."

She did it. A horrible sight. She continued :

" I shall smoke a long cigarette and everything I say will have a double or even treble meaning. I shall wear something black. I'll do my hair up and oil it down. I'll cover my eyes in mascara. I . . . "

" Will be left at home," I cut in, " if you threaten me any more."

A small boy in pink bathing drawers full of moth holes through which his brown skin could be seen, came up to us and stood staring in the mute fixed fashion of children who wish to be noticed.

" Hullo," I said, " who are you ? "

The young Corsican said :

" Are you Mr. Roberts ? "

" I am," I nodded.

" Mr. Buckingham gives you this." As he spoke he drew a piece of paper from the corner of his drawers and held it out to me.

I stared dumbly at him. To hear on the lips of a strange child a name that has been beating in your mind for days is something of a shock.

I took the envelope gingerly.

The boy, his errand completed, turned away, but having recovered somewhat from my initial surprise I called after him. He stopped and looked uncertainly at me.

" Money," I said, fumbling in my pocket.

He leapt eagerly forward.

I pulled out a five franc coin.

" Where were you given this note ? " I asked, holding up the coin.

" In the street," he nodded towards the high street that ran behind Yetty's bar.

" A man gave it to you ? "

" Yes."

"What sort of man?"

The child shrugged his shoulders.

"A Corsican?"

The child shook his head.

"A foreigner?"

The child nodded.

"What was he like?"

"Very old," said the child solemnly.

"White hair?"

"N-no."

"How old?" The sudden appearance in this drama of an aged man was puzzling.

"Over thirty," said the infant in awe.

I began to understand.

"You can't describe him?"

"N-no."

"Nor his clothes?"

"N-no. Can I have my money?"

I hesitated. If only the child could be more explicit. I opened the note. It was brief. It was in the same handwriting as the one sent to Yetty. It ran:

"Nothing doing here, Anthony. I don't need you. Better go home before you run into trouble.—Yours, JOHN."

I looked at the message intently. If John Buckingham had gone to Ajaccio the day before, how did he know that I was standing on the quay at this moment? A confederate? But Buckingham was working alone. It did not need much to convince me that this note was a fake. If so, then the one to Yetty was also a fake. Where, then, was John Buckingham?

The same old question. I looked at the note again. Who had written it? I looked around the quay. No

change. The same set. I suddenly felt that the whole scene had been built up merely to puzzle me. They were all hiding something. Everybody except me was in the secret. That was why there was so much laughter. They were laughing at me fumbling in the dark like the stooge in Blindman's Buff!

At this stage I noticed a movement in Ignace's café. It was an insignificant and perfectly harmless movement: Vserolov was lowering himself into his chair. Nothing strange in that surely—or was there? Where had he been? There was, of course, the possibility that the call of nature had claimed him, but then again there might have been another reason. It was a slender chance but I took it. I began to describe Vserolov to the child.

"Was that the man?" I asked.

"Yes. Yes," nodded the child, holding out his hand for the money.

At last we were getting somewhere. But were we? What value could be attached to the evidence of such a child as this? He'd agree to anything for a five-franc piece.

"If you've finished your ruminations," said Ann, "give the child its money. It is getting positively restless."

It obviously suspected a trap, as an expression of doubt and chagrin now came over its face.

"Here you are," I said, handing him the big, bright coin. The child snatched at it and was away in a second.

"Well," said Ann presently. "May I congratulate you?"

"Thank you," I grinned.

"So it is our friend Vserolov again?"

"Looks like it," I acknowledged.

"What do we do about it?"

"That," I answered, "is a question I cannot answer."

I looked at the café again. Vserolov was lighting a cigarette, while a newcomer lowered himself into the seat behind him.

"Damn," I said, "it might have been him!"

"I beg your pardon?" said Ann mildly.

"Oh, nothing," I replied. "Let's go to Yetty's."

.

The Citadel night club at Calvi must be the only converted Bishop's Palace in the world. The Bishop, of course, is no longer in residence. When he fled is not certain. His mansion, however, remains and faces the bay with thin, high windows, and sloping walls gleaming yellow in the sunshine, and silver in the moonlight. To reach it a long climb up the ramparts of the citadel must be undertaken, and this when the moon is bright is an ecstasy of ethical perfection.

I wish I could evoke the beauty of that town. I am no writer, however, and must leave you to select the words to evoke the scene. The best I can do is to tell you to search back in your minds to the fairy castles and dream cities of your youth; that is what Calvi looks like in the moonlight.

Once the Club had been reached and we had passed through bright, narrow doors, all the outer frailty was forgotten in the sudden immersion into the up-to-date atmosphere of a dance floor. All the trappings were there. Except for the glimpse of the calm waters of the bay through the open windows one might be in London.

We were bowed graciously to a seat by a window. The cool evening breeze curled over our foreheads and

the lights twinkled along the waterfront as if keeping time with the music which was produced by Vserolov, with his violin, and a pianist who was none other than the man who had joined Vserolov and Rudge at the Little Corporal that afternoon.

A waiter bowed. We ordered brandy. It would probably be doped, like all the drinks there. We would, however, drink very little.

There were only a few people in the Club as it was still early. A party from a yacht that had weighed anchor that morning formed the nucleus of the noise, while two rigid English spinsters, a formal group of black-coated French people and the usual smatter of honey-mooners (including the couple from the Nord-Sud) looked on in fish-like wonder at the noisy antics of the yacht folk.

We sipped our brandy. It was heavy and sweet, and had a slight back taste that warned us of the dope.

Vserolov continued to fiddle away. His thin white face portrayed a mystical somnolence. It was hard to reconcile this picture of him with that of the man stoking the fire at Bonifatio.

He moved over to the yachting party and bowed graciously to them. One, a long flaxen haired girl with a supple figure, stood up, glass in hand, amid an outburst of clapping. Vserolov adjusted the violin beneath his chin and began to play at great speed. The girl put her lips to the glass and drank down the whole contents in a gulp. When she took the glass away from her mouth Vserolov stopped playing. The girl was panting. Some of the liquid spilled out of her mouth and dripped on to her dress. She was flushed and was giggling foolishly. Her party was clapping merrily. Vserolov held out a saucer. She turned the

glass upside down over it. A further outbreak of clapping occurred. The girl rocked fuzzily, broke the glass on the table and sat down abruptly.

"What are they doing?" asked Ann.

"Initiating," I answered. "Supposed to be an old Russian custom, exploited here as a means of selling drink. As long as the drinker drinks the violin plays. As soon as the glass is empty the saucer is held under it to make sure that it has been drained to the last drop."

"And if it isn't?"

"Then the ceremony starts all over again. They do it to all new members."

"Any other new members?" cried a thick voice to the room in general.

I felt Ann clutch my hand. "Will I have to do it?" she asked.

"Don't know," I replied. "Wait and see."

Vserolov smiled thinly, bowed to the party and shuffled towards our table. The yacht crowd peered over each other's heads in our direction. There was much clapping and shouts of "Go on!" "Good." "Here's fun."

Vserolov bowed.

"Monsieur has never been initiated," he said.

I stood up angrily. "Course I have," I retorted. "You know that."

"Monsieur has never been initiated. Is his glass ready?" Vserolov smiled.

"Come on!" urged the yacht party. "Drink it up." "It won't kill you."

I shook my head.

"The penalty," smiled Vserolov, "is expulsion from the Club, immediate expulsion." He stressed his words.

"Out with him," cried the yachting party, "he's no fit companion for us."

There would soon be a rough house. I had seen them before. I looked at my glass. I knew it had dope. All the drinks there had dope. I had to stay, yet if I did not drink I would be kicked out and if I did drink . . . ? I picked up my glass. Up came the violin to Vserolov's chin. I saw Ann staring anxiously at me. I could feel the eyes of the rest of the room on me.

"I'm a damn fool," I thought. "Still, here goes."

I drank. Now I am unfortunately not one of those happy mortals who can pour great tankards of liquid down their throats. I sip my drink. I like to take my time and besides the mocking, insistent note of the violin confused me. I coughed and spluttered as I drank. Some of the liquid splashed. I felt sick. I finished the glass with a gulp.

Three drops fell on to the upturned saucer.

There were whoops of joy from the yachting party. This was fun! Here was a victim! The consequences were often highly entertaining and the exit, hand over mouth of a novice always a pantomime.

"Another glass," said Vserolov evenly.

"Don't," cried Ann impulsively.

A waiter was bowing obsequiously at my side, carafe in hand. I suddenly hated the place, with a deep thrilling hatred that stuck in my throat. The shallow music, the shaded lights, the greeny black of old dinner-jackets and the dyed hair of women all repulsed me. There was something evil and cruel here, something that the music covered, that the jaded smiles endeavoured to hide. There was something here that could kill artistic innocence in the sunlight without a tremor.

I felt a strange shudder of revolt go through me. Why did people have to torture each other? What more did they gain by killing each other than by

wearing a gardenia in their lapel? Killing each other? Nonsense! It was, of course, all nonsense. It was like a nightmare weaving invisible and tenacious threads around me. If I shouted loud enough I would wake myself up.

I braced myself. My head was spinning. I steadied my gaze and, looking Vserolov straight in the eyes, said slowly and clearly:

"Where is Mr. Buckingham?"

The man looked coldly at me. His face seemed to fade, grow blurred and then become so clear that I could see each stump of hair on his chin. The blood sang in my ears. The damn drink had been strongly doped. I felt faint. Only the unreasonable fury that had made me want to smash the cool face in front of me kept me up. Subconsciously I knew I was making a mistake.

"I do not know Mr. Buckingham, sir," he said.

"Monsieur does not wish to drink any more, I take it?"

"No. Certainly not. Get out."

Vserolov bowed and moved away. The exuberant party from the yacht losing interest forgot me.

I sat down. My head was dizzy and an aching headache sat across my eyebrows. I wanted to go back to London, back to my easy life and away from the maddening puzzle about me.

No doubt I deserve nothing more than complete contempt, but before dismissing me as a fool it is well to remember that in real life, as opposed to fiction, events do not always fall out according to plan.

It was, too, remember, my first taste of such peculiar people, and I was still too much of an Englishman to take it really to heart.

The gloominess of the situation was not improved when Ann, having asked me who Mr. Buckingham

might be, received a curt "mind your own business" for answer.

She naturally took offence and one of those uncomfortable silences, heavy with hurt feelings, descended upon us and we sat in sulky silence at our table as if expecting to be photographed for the *Tatler*.

I stood up. Ann looked up expectantly.

"No," I said. "I'm not going to ask you to dance. I'm going to find out what is going on here."

"It will look very obvious."

"It will. Very well, let's dance."

So dance we did, quietly around the floor until we came to the exit door behind the band. I looked at Vserolov. He was fiddling dreamily away, his back to us. The lights were dim. Nobody was looking.

"Now," I whispered.

We passed through the door. It was dark outside. Hand-in-hand we felt our way forward.

"Stay here," I whispered to Ann.

"I'm coming with you," she answered.

"No," I said. "Talk to the policeman."

I pointed to a figure ahead of us who stood by a studded door let into the side of the wall. He was a young Corsican, handsome in a dark bull-necked fashion.

We approached.

"Not this way," he said, looking keenly at Ann.

She smiled. He saluted.

"Why not?" she asked.

"These are the private apartments of the club. The public are not permitted to enter."

"Am I the public?" she pouted.

"Mademoiselle," he bowed gallantly, "even for your beautiful eyes, I cannot let you pass."

"And you must stay here all night?"

"Alas, yes, Mademoiselle."

"With nothing to drink?"

The Corsican smiled. "No one said so," he grinned.

"You must be thirsty. May I get you something?" she asked.

"Brought by your fair hands, Mademoiselle, it will taste doubly sweet."

She held out her hand.

"Come," she said. "The passage is dark and I don't want to fall."

The gallant policeman was only too eager to oblige. His fat eyes gleamed. He pulled at his cheap tunic. Don Juan could do no better. Agreed? He smiled with a row of golden teeth. The fair English Mademoiselle was easy prey. A little too easy, perhaps, but then these Northern girls were crazy about Latins! And could one blame them? Not he!

I hugged the wall. As Police-constable Cassanova passed he looked at me in scorn. Not much of a lover this Englishman; but the opposition was pretty overpowering, wasn't it? He grinned and felt very important.

I looked back after they had passed. The policeman was still quaking with confident laughter. Ann still held his hand. I slipped up to the door, opened it and squeezed my way in. I came upon a spiral staircase. It was of cold stone, white and dim in the moonlight. I began to climb. There was a door on my right. A slit of light showed it to be half open. I stood listening. Not a sound. I peeked through and saw a window and a dressing-table. I put my head round the door. My heart was all het up. The room was empty. A large double bed, canopied *à la* Louis XIV stood opposite the dressing-table. Thick mats lay on the floor. The walls were bare except for the paintings of a saintly

nature encased in thick gilt frames. The Gothic windows and vaulted spaces gave the room a deeply religious appearance. His lordship the Bishop slept here once. Who slept here now ?

There was a further door. I tip-toed across the room. I felt large and cumbersome. I reached the second door and peered into the room. It was a dressing-room. There was a divan against the further wall, and on it a strange assortment of clothes. I counted at least seventeen pairs of trousers varying from a deep black to white, and as many coats, shirts and ties, besides an assortment of pull-overs, hats and scarves. It was like a Petticoat Lane stall. To the left of the divan stood a dressing-table with a powerful light shining down upon a medley of topees, beards, moustaches and small post of cream. Any actor would have been proud of such possessions. Pins, tape, tubes and mirrors mingled with whiskers, glue and small black patches.

At that moment I heard water splashing. This single sound was more blood-curdling than any hysterical scream. Until then I had imagined I was alone in the apartment. Now someone was having a bath. There was the sound of soapy hands rubbing a wet body. I suddenly felt an unquenchable desire to laugh. I'd caught the murderer (for who else could it be ?) in his bath ! I tip-toed into the dressing-room and saw a door at the far side ajar from which a billow of steam eddied into the room.

A sudden bellowing voice burst into song. The deep notes rose and fell ecstatically from the warm interior. The words were German. I could not understand the meaning, but the tune was vaguely familiar, like tunes one has heard on the wireless. The proud, boastful voice bellowed on. I crept nearer and was almost at the door when all the lights went out. The singing

stopped. The bather shouted something in German. From the direction of the door from which I had come a woman's voice screamed a reply, of which I understood two words "Englander" and "Roberts." I crouched behind a chair. There was a sound of cursing from the bathroom. Then a great splashing of water as the man heaved himself out. The bathroom light went out and there was no more noise. It was very dark. For the first time I noticed that the windows of that room were closed and shuttered. I felt for the wall. It was soft. Padded! No wonder the man bellowed so brazenly. I listened. Not a sound. It was as if the light switch had whisked the intruders away. I stood so still I began to feel a cramp growing in my legs. My hands were shaking. I began to move slowly round the wall towards the door. There was only a woman there. I might be able to rush her and get out of the room. With my hands extended in front of me I moved inch by inch. In spite of the thick carpet my tip-toed footfalls screamed in my bursting ears. My breath came in short gasps.

Crash!

I threw myself on the floor as a vase burst and rolled about the carpet. A beam of strong white light fell upon me. It came from a torch three feet from me. All I could see was its dazzling heart weaving towards me. I leapt up with a yell and rushed towards the door. As I leapt the light leapt too. A warm, steaming figure still smelling of soap, seemed to envelop me. I felt something hard and irresistible hit me on the back of the head.

"How silly!" I thought, as I fell forward and lost consciousness.

FIVE

"I WON'T," I screamed. "I won't," but I knew that cries were useless and that I would have to do it. I did not know what it was but it was something dreadful that filled me with disgust. I struggled and groped in the blinding inferno that was about me, but the more I struggled the more I knew that I would have to do it. "I won't," I whimpered. "I won't."

"Of course, you won't, old boy," said a distant and reassuring voice. "Take it easy. You'll be O.K."

I felt a solid hand holding mine. I grasped it feverishly. It was the first solid thing I'd touched for centuries. The inferno subsided. Now all was spinning like the inside of a top and yet through it I could see a dim, real figure bending over me. I concentrated grimly. The spinning thinned out. It ceased. I sat up with a tremble and found myself looking at John Buckingham.

"Where am I?" I groaned.

"In a jam," replied John, "but everything will be O.K."

I looked about.

I was lying on straw. A hard stone floor fled to dark corners, while rose-coloured walls rose in arches above me. A small, barred window, high up, let in a long bright slit of dust-dancing light. There was a door, so tightly closed as to be almost invisible against the wall opposite me, while beside me stood a round table with a plate and a tin mug on it. For the rest the room was empty.

"Where am I?" I asked again.

"In the dungeons of the Bishop's Palace, I'm afraid," replied John. "Pleasant spot. Feeling better?"

"Yes," I replied. "How did you get here?"

"Tell you later. Have a drink. We only get water here, I'm afraid."

John stood up. I noticed then that his clothes were soiled and dirty. There was no shape to his trousers. His coat hung loosely over his aertex shirt. His shoes were dusty. His portly figure showed signs of wear and tear.

He brought me the water and noticed my look.

"Can't keep smart sleeping in one's clothes," he said apologetically. "They allow me to shave, however."

"Who—they?"

"Mr. Vernon Rudge—among others. Drink this."

I drank and felt better.

"Who else?"

"Most of the people in the Club. They are tacit participators only, however. As long as they receive money they affect to ignore the rest. It is one of Corsica's failings." He said this in a supercilious and bored manner.

"What is all this about?" I cried. "I've been groping in the dark so long I'm all mixed up."

"I know," laughed the other, "you were not very cunning, still for an amateur . . ." He waved a disparaging hand. I felt very small.

"Do you know anything about me then?"

"Almost everything, I should say. Vernon Rudge has a sense of humour of a sort. He made a special point of keeping me informed of all your movements."

"The devil he did!"

I shivered.

"But how did you land up here?" I hoped there was no spite in my voice.

"Let me hear your story first."

So I told him all that had happened since the fateful day that I had been called to the War Office. He listened intently, his eyes hard on me. Sometimes he nodded. Sometimes smiled at my mistakes. It was a relief to be able to talk.

When I had finished he seemed to ponder.

"Yes, it fits," he said. "You are wrong about Vserolov, however. He is working for the Deuxième Bureau."

"Vserolov? He was my main suspect."

"Possibly. Nevertheless there it is."

"Why was he burning your clothes and those of Madame François, Tchistovsky, and Helen?"

"We were dead. We would not need them. He has been here many years and has posed as one of those who will do anything for money. He believes that in this manner he can get nearer the real trouble makers. He is what you might call a permanent member. By relying on an unpleasant character carefully built up he hopes to get closer to the roots of whatever syndicate is at work. There have been many in Calvi. This is just another case for him, with an Englishman to compete with. He doesn't think much of us. Professional jealousy, you know."

"Didn't he give me that note when I was on the quayside?"

"You said that the violinist sat down too!"

"What a fool I've been!" I cried bitterly.

"As a matter of fact, old boy, for an amateur you've done exceptionally well. You've only been here a few days and yet you almost caught our man!"

"In his bath!"

"What better place?"

We both laughed.

"What is it that you are after?" I asked presently.

"The leader, master-mind, organiser, call him what you like."

"Who is he?"

"The gentleman who sang in the bath."

"So I gathered, but do you know his name?"

"Mr. Ned Stone if I'm not mistaken."

I gasped in amazement. "Stone?" I cried. "Stone? Uncle Ned Stone? Then the woman who switched off the lights was Nona?"

"If it wasn't your charming Ann."

"Ann?" I yelled. This on the top of the revelations of the last few minutes was too much. "Ann?" I mumbled incredulously.

"Why not? She knew that you were prowling. What more easy than to follow you?"

"It can't be Ann," I muttered. "It doesn't fit. She is so young, so very much the sweet young girl."

"To you."

"But... but..."

There were a thousand objections I wanted to make, but as they presented themselves I knew that they could be answered. She was Stone's niece. I knew nothing more of her than what she herself had told me. I had met her casually on the ship. She was aware of my movements. Then there were her questions. Was it just curiosity or not? Her actions assumed a new significance. And yet it could not be. I refused to believe it. But she was Stone's niece and her story was strange and infinitely elastic. No parents. A vague guardian who allowed her to roam at will. Her decision to join an unknown uncle. It all fitted in. It might be her and yet I still would not believe it. No woman could have eyes so blue and innocent as hers unless she were innocent, could she? No woman was such an actress, was she? Oh hell, I did not know what to think.

"Have another drink," said John with a smile. I drank.

"Tell me your side of the story," I asked.

John began his tale.

"There are in England a number of German agents. They have lived there for many years, building up their lives and becoming so English that no one would ever suspect them of being anything else. Many of them are known to us, some are not. What is unknown at present is the method by which these agents receive their orders from abroad, and especially the manner in which such orders will operate once the war begins. Once the channel of information is discovered then a two-fold object is achieved. First such agents as are unknown to us will be revealed and secondly fake information can be sent to the enemy.

"The link in this chain is somewhere on the Riviera. That much we knew. That and very little else. I was sent out. I started in Paris, and following various clues ended up here, for it is under the cover of this Club that the final plans are being made. The Deuxième Bureau knew something of it. Hence Vserolov's interest. Here it was that people like Vernon Rudge collected. You remember the pianist at the Club?"

"Yes; an insignificant looking man," I replied.

"His best disguise; he is known to be a German agent."

"Why isn't he arrested?"

"We can bring no definite charge against him. However, that is neither here nor there. When I arrived I began my enquiries. I soon discovered that Vernon Rudge and the pianist were involved. Vserolov was helpful in this matter. I also realised that the Bishop's Palace was being used as a blind. I knew that in a corrupt place like Calvi all were open to bribery. I

knew, too, that men like Rudge and Entofen, the pianist, were merely tools for someone higher. They were not the kind to work on their own.

"From rumours, conversations overheard and communications intercepted I soon discovered that the final arrangements were being completed and that the boss was supervising the whole business himself. I still did not know, however, what this business might be, but felt that once the chief had arrived my task would be easier.

"It was then that Stone and Nona arrived. Instead of making things easier, however, the fact that they lived on a yacht complicated the issue. Their rapid comings and goings, ostensibly to visit the beautiful scenery of the island, but in reality to complete their preparations and establish the necessary contacts, made my task even harder. It was then that I decided to call you in.

"I was taking a risk, but I did not want one of our usual men. I figured that an innocent face (and yours, Anthony, is nothing if not guileless!) would arouse no suspicion, and while you watched Stone and his party I could do some useful snooping around in the yacht.

"It was while I was waiting for you that I met Madame François. Now she is, or was, poor soul, a very clever woman. How much of her forecasts were in truth based on clairvoyance I do not know, but I do know she was both observant and rational. She also knew everything that was going on in Calvi, and on top of all this was intensely patriotic.

"I remember going to her one day and sitting in that room of hers. She was turning her cards, looking intently at them and speaking to me without looking up. She told me so much about my activities that I

realised she knew the truth. Then, still looking at her cards, she said in a low, evenly balanced voice :

“ ‘ There is danger coming to Calvi. Danger that threatens all that you and I love. We must work together if that danger is to be avoided. The evil men, I see, are cunning. They plot and plan in a house of God, a house where the steward of God once lived. They cover their plans with music and drink.’ ”

“ I listened intently to her. She continued in the same tone of voice.

“ ‘ There are mountains, high mountains where pools of water gather. The water is as clear as crystal.’ ”

“ I knew she was speaking of Bonifatio.”

“ ‘ I see the evil shadows of these men huddled on the waters. It is peaceful there. None but the wild mules roam. They gather there, in a glade where there is a flat rock, to make their plans. They wait there the arrival of their leader. He will go to them soon and the final plans will be made.’ ”

“ I was listening with great interest now, as you can imagine. I had never connected Bonifatio with the activities of these men. I had always imagined that they operated from the Palace. That the Palace itself might be a blind never entered my head.

“ I pressed her for more details but she had nothing more to tell me at that time. She had only just stumbled on the plot. She would communicate with me as soon as she had more details.

“ A few days later I received a further message from her. She asked me to look her up as she now had definite information. I went to her house immediately. She was not there. I asked after her from a boy. ‘ Gone to the mountains,’ he said, and showed me a note.

“ It was written in French and was a passable imitation of my handwriting. It asked her to meet me at

the Small House immediately. The Small House lies on the Bonifatio road about two miles out of Calvi. She was not to know that it was a forgery."

"So that is where she was going when Tchistovsky saw her?"

"Probably. I never saw her again. I followed after her as quickly as I could, but though I roamed up and down the Bonifatio road she never appeared. The Small House was empty. They were probably killing her at that moment."

"How?"

"I don't know—yet."

That significant "yet" sent a shiver running through me. I knew only too well what he meant.

"Why haven't they—er—done it to you yet?" I asked.

"Don't ask me," replied John. "Probably because they don't want to litter the beach with too many corpses. They probably have a private slaughter house by the Nord-Sud and slip their cold victims into the sea from there. We'll see soon enough."

Again that shiver came over me. I am no braver and no more cowardly than anyone else, but to sit quietly in a dark and musty cellar with the knowledge that some dreadful unknown death is soon to come upon you needs greater courage than I possess.

"How did they catch you?" I asked.

"In my flat. I returned from Bonifatio about lunch time, just before your ship hove to and went straight to my flat. Somebody must have been standing behind the door. I was off my guard for I suspected nothing. The next thing I remember is waking up in this cellar three days ago."

"So I almost caught you after all?" I cried. "I must have been in your flat while you were here, and left before they returned to tidy up!"

"A close shave, young fellah!"

"Not the only one either!—poor Tchistovsky! He thought he'd live to be two hundred and fifty, you know. It wasn't fair on him and Helen. They did not want trouble. They did not realise that they were condemning themselves to death when they spoke that night. We know the risk we are taking, and are willing (I hope?) to take it, but they . . . if I ever find that swine again . . ." I fell into an impatient silence.

"Yes. It was hard on them. The murderer or murderers could not take the risk however. They had solved a great problem, for whereas the disappearance of a person arouses suspicion, the discovery of a body apparently dead from natural causes awakens none. If Tchistovsky had insisted all their planning would be in vain. Suspicion would be aroused and then God knows what might not happen. They had to act quickly. As you know they did."

"Wasn't it a risk?"

"Why should it be? Nobody except us have felt the least suspicious. Even the doctor was convinced, and the police, traditionally lazy would never go out of their way to find trouble."

There was a pensive silence.

"Seems to me that the murders must have taken place in the mountains," I said at last.

"Why?"

"Madame François was heading that way. The clothes were burnt up there."

"How do the bodies get to the sea?"

"By car."

"In the daylight?" contemptuously.

"It could be covered up, driven to some place by the Nord-Sud and slipped into the sea. Has Stone got a car?"

"Not as far as I know."

"Doesn't that let him out?"

"Vernon Rudge has one. A Ford V.8 Cabriolet."

"Just the thing. Then there is Ignace and his taxis."

"Ignace may be a smuggler, but he is not a murderer," replied John Buckingham forcibly. "Too wily for that game. He has built up a first-class business here, and would hardly wish to destroy it."

"So it must be Rudge's car?"

"Unless," said John thoughtfully, "they used the yacht, Stone's yacht."

"How?"

"The coast is wild to the south-west. They could easily put in at a lonely bay and pick up the bodies brought down there by Rudge, then slip them overboard when turning the point by the Nord-Sud. Was Stone's yacht out at any time prior to the discovery of the bodies?"

"It was in the bay when I arrived at Calvi. I remember seeing it with Ann."

"It may have just anchored. Madame François's body was washed up about the time you arrived. It would take at least a couple of hours to wash ashore. Stone would have had ample time to deposit it and weigh anchor before your ship arrived. What about the time Tchistovsky and Helen were found?"

"I can't remember."

"Did you notice it in the bay?"

I puzzled back to the time of the picnic with Ann. Then I remembered.

"It wasn't there at all. I remember Ann telling me that Uncle Ned was making a trip to a monastery up the coast. She had declined the invitation to go, preferring to picnic with me."

"A cover."

"I suppose so, but if the yacht wasn't there how . . . ?"

"Stone only had to sail past the Nord-Sud. He did not have to come into the bay."

"The thing that impresses me," I said, after a further pause, "is the speed with which they work. Take the case of Tchistovsky and Helen. They blurted out their death warrant in the evening, and were dead by three the next afternoon. In that time they had to be caught, killed, slipped into the sea and washed up. It almost looks as if they were caught that very same evening, or at the very latest early the next morning."

"Quite possibly ; what are you driving at ?"

"The gang, or whatever you call it, must either have an exceptionally well-developed system of inter-communication, or else the leader himself was at Yetty's at the time."

"You were there. Who else was there ?"

"About thirty people."

"Stone ?"

"Yes," I replied uneasily, "yes. He was there with Nona and Ann."

"Isn't that sufficient proof ?"

"There were others : Vernon Rudge was playing bridge with Vserolov, Phillips and Entofen the piano player. What about Phillips ?"

"An ex-gangster from San Francisco. Small fry, given to exaggeration. He is fundamentally honest. His sole ambition is to be left alone to play poker with people not quite so good as himself. Who else was there ?"

"Dr. and Mrs. Frant."

"That bore ! Poor woman ; she has her hands full. He practises at Canterbury. Been there for the last twenty years. Overworks ; had a nervous break-

down six years ago, from which only a prolonged world tour restored him. Since then does little work, having brought in a partner, and spends much of his time travelling, working off the restlessness due to the breakdown."

"A Canadian called Toby."

"Too rich. Bad case of *wanderlust* and dollars. Promotes art and takes the dilettante's interest in it. A nonentity. Who else?"

"A man called Smart was there, though I did not see him."

"Smart! The usual crazy Englishman who loves his country but cannot live in it; but has to love the moon, keep cats and dance with mountain goats instead."

"There was also the usual yachting crowd and a few French people; oh, and a honeymoon couple living at the Nord-Sud—and Yetty, of course."

"Of course."

"That was all."

"Did you notice Stone's actions while Tchistovsky was talking?"

"No. My attention was concentrated on the painter."

"A pity—you might have understood, and been forewarned."

"And not in this mess!"

We laughed wryly. There did not seem much else to do.

"How about a game of noughts and crosses?" I said brightly.

"Got a pencil?"

"Yes."

I produced a chewed stump. John Buckingham poked fingers into pockets. A piece of paper fell out.

"I forgot all about this; they must have overlooked it when searching my pockets," he muttered.

He stared at the sheet of paper and handed it to me, saying : " What do you make of this ? "

I took the paper. It was soiled, torn and crumpled. It had the tired look of paper that has been sitting too long in a pocket. On it was printed the following :

25	Sunkist	35	45
26	Slim	34	31
27	Sand-washed	40	35
28	Youth	37	40
29	Crepe	32	63
30	Loveliness	30	50

" What the hell does it mean ? " I cried.

" Ask me," grinned John.

" I am."

" What is your first impression on reading it ? " He looked at me as a schoolmaster might look at an eager pupil.

I scratched my head.

" It has a familiar ring in it. Something to do with advertisements in women's newspapers. ' Sunkist for that superfluous hair.' You know ! Something of that sort ! "

" What do you make of the first column ? "

" A list of figures. Serial numbers or catalogue numbers."

" You will note it stops at thirty. Isn't that significant ? "

" Thirty ? Thirty ? "

" Thirty days have September,
April, June and November ! "

" The date ! What month ? "

" Unknown," shrugged John.

"What does the rest mean? Creams? Powders? What of the two other columns? Compositions? Numbers? Prices?"

"Might be," doubtfully.

"What has this to do with our unpleasant friends?" I asked.

"It is some form of code. I found it in Paris after a burglary. The unexpected return of the owner upset my plans. In the brief but hectic struggle that followed I escaped with my life—which was lucky—and this scrap which was unlucky!"

"Has it anything to do with the case? After all it might be a shopping list?" I asked sceptically.

"Is it usual to keep a shopping list in a locked-up portfolio buried in a safe among papers of so confidential a nature that most of them are written in code?" asked John, with heavy irony.

"You couldn't get anything else?"

"As I said before, there was a struggle. It was dark. I grabbed the case. It was wrenched from my hands. I grabbed again, clutched a sheet of paper, pulled, heard it tear and legged it!"

I stared again at the paper. It made no sense to me. I've never been good at crossword puzzles, acrostics or Intelligence Tests.

John Buckingham smiled as I gave it back to him.

"How about our noughts and crosses?" he grinned.

I was leading seventeen points to fourteen when there was a sound of approaching footsteps. A key jangled and the door swung open to reveal Vernon Rudge's smiling and cynical countenance.

He entered our cell, and with a polite "Good-morning, gentlemen," removed his hat and beamed benevolently at us from across the room.

SIX

VERNON RUDGE looked at his watch.

"It is seven-thirty," he said, pleasantly, "and I guess it's not too early to start."

He was an unpleasant sight. His thick face was blotched and netted with vivid veins while under his chin the badly shaven skin hung loose. His cold eyes stared at us from under thick black eyebrows, and on his mouth was a cynical leer. In the dim light of the cellar he appeared even more menacing than in Yetty's bar. One hand was in his coat pocket and I knew that he was fingering a pistol.

"Where do we go?" asked John.

"To your death," replied the other, laconically. "On this day, Tuesday the twenty-second of August, 1939, at roughly three p.m. British Summer Time your bodies will be gently washed up on the beach. You will have died of sunstroke. People will shake their heads. So careless, these English, to go out sunbathing in the hot Corsican sun, so careless! Gee, I think yer very silly, what d'yer say?"

We said nothing. It is not pleasant to have death forecast so concisely. The conversation in any case was one-sided, to say the least of it.

"Y'know, people often wonder when they will die. Will it be in June or September, this year or ten years' time, or more? It worries some people sick. At least you're spared that."

He broke into a roar of laughter.

"Gee," he cried, "I sure am glad I'm not in your shoes—not that you'll be in them long yourselves."

This latest effort at humour tickled him so much that

his laughter increased until the room swam in it. He began coughing and spitting and the tears came running out of his pouchy eyes.

"Nice little fellow, isn't he?" remarked John pleasantly.

I nodded dumbly. There was a hot feeling about my eyes. "Oh God," I was praying, "just let me get my fingers into that neck, please, dear God, just for a little while. I don't ask many favours, but just a little while, please!"

Vernon Rudge, however, never let his eyes stray from us nor his hand from his pocket.

Two other men entered the room. They were Corsicans. One was Pedro, the other the tall, silent man that had stood behind me while Ann and I drank their wine up at Bonifatio. Pedro was an agile little man. His head was shrunken into his shoulders. He held two pieces of rope in his hand.

"The time's up," said Vernon.

Pedro jumped nimbly towards us. He was soon behind my back twisting my arms together. I could feel his strong fingers weaving and bracing the rope together. His breath came in excited garlic-laden gasps. His companion stood silently beside John gazing gravely at him as a farmer might size up a pig on its way to the slaughter house.

Pedro had soon finished with me. He turned next to John. I tested the rope that bound me. It did not hurt. Though strongly tied it did not bite into my flesh. There was room for the movement of my muscles. "I suppose they do not want to leave any marks," I thought.

"It is done," said Pedro proudly at last. His companion nodded a grave approval.

"O.K.," said Vernon, "let's go. Just a warning.

We shall be passing, pretty rapidly I admit, through Calvi. You might be tempted to shout. It would probably be useless. Anyhow I shall be with you. The slightest cry and I'll drill you through the stomach. An unpleasant death, they say."

"Look a bit weird being washed up with a bullet inside, won't we?"

"We have the means of getting rid of bodies. The sunstroke method is the best. It solves the question neatly, but don't worry there are other ways. Now, git——"

We left the chamber and mounted the steps until we reached the level of the street. Pedro opened a door and we were pushed out into a small enclosed courtyard. A derelict and barren fountain stood in the middle. A lemon tree struggling for life in a dusty corner endeavoured to reach the clear, blue sky above our heads. A large grey saloon car stood by the door. Vernon Rudge waved us in.

We got in. Rudge took the driver's seat with Pedro beside him. The silent one scrambled in with us. Pedro twisted round in his seat leaning over it like a schoolboy. The other Corsican stared pensively, his gaze from us. Vernon started up the motor.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

"We are being taken for a ride, aren't we?" asked John. "That is, I believe, the technical term used in America, or perhaps you wouldn't know?"

"In Germany too," grinned Vernon as the car moved forward with a powerful swaying movement. "Interesting car," he added in a talkative manner, "been in use quite a lot lately, you know. Double journey. Alive there, dead back. Cooks' Tours aren't in it. Wish you could see it the way I do. Here am I driving you two away and in a few hours I'll be driving you

back, You will then be dead. You'll be sitting together just as you are now, but your eyes will be white. There will be a little froth in your mouths. Your expression will be changed, but you'll be just the same, all the same—dumb ! ”

He roared with laughter again.

“ You'd have died if you could have seen that Russian painter and his girl. When we took them up they clung to each other like young lovers. He was telling me that I could not kill art ! She had her arms about him so sweet. When we had finished with them we tried to put them back in the same position, but their mouths hung open and their tongues lolled out. There they lay arm-in-arm making faces at each other. Laugh ! Jeese I've never laughed so much in my life ! ”

He laughed again.

We were bumping through Calvi now. The inhabitants were busy washing down the streets, they sluiced the cobbles with big pails of water, then chased the sludge away with bristle brooms and vigorous strokes. Vernon blared on the horn and the black dressed women pressed back on each side, while the big car swept past. It rocked gently and the vibration of the coachwork set up a tingle in my ears.

We could see the beach now to our left. I looked out at it. The sea was calm. Not a ripple on the whole bay. Just the long streaks of darker water where the current flowed braking the uniformity of its surface. I shivered as I thought that one of those very currents would soon be washing us ashore. I looked at the beach. In a fleeting second I saw Ann. She stood on the sand, feet apart, her young body braced, her bathing dress clinging to her wet body. Her hands were above her head. She was engaged in some sort of

physical exercise. A great feeling of loneliness and regret swept over me at that moment. She personified so adroitly youth, life and beauty that the realisation of what I was about to lose swept over me in a torrent. I did not want to die. It was not fear that fought in me. It was love of life. It seemed such a shame to go out on such a lovely day in such a lovely place with such a lovely girl doing her morning exercise on the warm sandy beach! Vernon saw her too.

"Our little Ann," he whispered. "A very useful little person. We always knew where to find you. A very useful little person indeed."

"I suppose Stone won't be accompanying us?" said John.

"Stone?" queried Vernon.

"We know all about him," said John.

"How very nice for you," laughed Vernon. "Wish I could say the same. I like men with girls like Ann in tow."

He laughed again and said no more.

The car lurched and swayed as it gathered speed on the straight white road that led to those blue mountains whose summits were lost in misty clouds.

We flashed past a pink farmhouse.

"Picked up Madame François there. She thought you, Buckingham, were in the car. Got the shock of her life when she saw us. Began screaming her head off. Tough customer, smelly, too. Fought all the way she did. Took time to die; too. These Corsican women are the devil."

"Shut up, you swine," cried John.

Vernon Rudge merely laughed aloud and drove faster.

The road soon began to climb. We lurched over bridges that spanned dry watercourses. We swung

round corners. We passed beneath overhanging rocks. We twisted in and out of cork trees and umbrella pines. We were leaving Calvi far behind. A last look and the town was hidden from our view. The mountains reared up on all sides. It was colder here. The sun filtered through the trees and between the peaks in blotches. There were patches of mist. The coolness of the night still lurked beneath the slopes.

We reached Bonifatio in what seemed a very short time. The woman was still there. She looked at me with an expressionless face as I got down from the car. She greeted the exuberant Piedro with a nod, and his companion with a glass of wine.

"More drink, Carmen," said Vernon.

The woman inclined her head and went to the hut. They stood about in a circle, staring at us. The silence of the forest lay heavily on us. We stood together hands bound, the centre of interest.

The woman reappeared. She carried a tray upon which were a line of glasses and three bottles. She set it quietly down on the rough wooden bench. She uncorked a bottle and poured the red wine into two of the glasses.

We watched.

"You will now drink," said Vernon.

The woman came to me. She put the glass to my lips and tilted the glass gently. The cool wine entered my mouth. Fearing a drug I spat it out and turned my head away.

Vernon came close to me.

"So you won't drink, eh? You must drink! Helen refused to drink—at first. We had to hold her down on this table. Piedro held her mouth open while Carmen poured the wine into her stomach with a funnel. Poor Helen coughed a little, but she drank."

"Why do we have to drink?" I cried. It seemed so senseless.

"It is necessary," replied Vernon calmly. "What will it be? Forced or not?"

"Better drink it up," said John. "After all we are their guests."

Carmen came to me again. Her hands were soft and gentle. So carefully did she force the wine down my throat that I might have been an invalid. She was very close to me; her head slightly bent, her eyes on the glass.

Between gulps I whispered, "What money to help me escape?"

She shook her head and tilted the glass a little more.

"I am rich," I lied.

"Drink," she said.

"I'm damned if I will," I cried, poking my head away and knocking the glass out of her hand with my shoulder. "You she-devil, how can you help these men with the murder of a stranger who has done you no harm?"

She stepped back and watched me with a smile. It was a dull, contented smile. As I watched it I shivered. All the cruelty of the Moorish blood which ran in her veins was in that smile. She was as ruthless as the swarthy Vernon himself.

"Trouble, eh?" sneered Vernon. "On to the table with him."

I struggled wildly, kicking at them, buffeting them with my shoulder, tripping them up with my feet, but with my hands bound I was helpless. They hit me over the head with the palms of their hands and carried me half dazed to the table. Pedro held my mouth open while the woman, a bright light in her eyes and a smile upon her lips, poured in the drink, gently, oh so gently in my mouth.

I drank. The wine warmed me. My head was dizzy, my eyes were tired. All I could see were the sky and the trees and against them the brown-faced woman giving me wine.

"Enough," said Vernon.

I sat up. The wine was strong. My head was still dizzy. I stumbled off the table and felt sick. Pedro held me up.

"Come," said Vernon.

We were led back to the car and thrown inside. Our captors resumed their seats and we were on the move again. The woman they called Carmen stood serenely by the roadside, just as she had stood when Ann and I had taken the taxi back to Calvi.

"This is not true," I muttered to myself, "this is a nightmare, I'll wake up soon. This cannot be true." I looked at John. He lolled back beside me. His face was white and his teeth were clenched. I could see the ridge that his jaw-bones made beneath his skin.

The car stopped. I looked out and saw the pools where Ann and I had sheltered from the fire. The waterfall fell monotonously. The black, charred remains of tree and bush reflected their ugliness in the calm waters.

We were pushed out into the road and led down the slope, across the water and then in single file round the buff until we came to the hollow in which lay the flat rock that had held our attention once before.

Here we halted. The wine was having some effect. I felt dazed and a little drunk. My eyelids were heavy. I wanted to go to sleep.

We stopped. It was shady and cool in the hollow. The sun was behind the peak. We could see it shining on a clump of trees above us.

"Here we are," said Vernon. I noticed for the first

time that he carried a parcel. He must have taken it from the car as he got out. He undid the string. There were two bathing drawers inside. Blue, woollen drawers, with a white belt and cinnamon clasp.

"Untie him." Vernon pointed at me. Piedro undid his work promptly, then stood close to me as I worked my cramped wrist.

"Put this on," he said. "You can do it aided or unaided," he grinned.

I felt very weak. The potency of the wine was in me. I began to undress slowly. They stood by watching, waiting for a move on my part. Vernon was in front, his hand in his coat pocket. I could see the outline of the muzzle of his revolver. It was pointing at me. Piedro stood on my right, his companion on my left.

I was soon dressed in the swimming suit. They piled my clothes in a heap. I stood shivering in the cool air; the rock was cold beneath my feet. The feeling that it was all a nightmare increased.

Piedro bound me up. When I had been rendered incapable of movement they turned their attention to John.

Soon we were both ready. Vernon surveyed us.

"O.K.," he said. "Tie them up one at a time."

They took me first. They led me to the centre of the stone. They bent down and removing four rough covers pulled from out of the holes thus displayed four steel rings that were attached to a chain plugged to the bottom of the dark hole. The rings had a coating of blue Sorbo rubber on the inside and were fashioned like handcuffs. They laid me on my stomach and slipped a ring round each of my wrists and my ankles.

They stood up. I was now lying with outstretched limbs like a frog on the bisecting table. The rock was hard and cold on my chest and stomach. It was hard to my cheek; I lay shivering from cold.

They turned to John and did the same to him, laying him outstretched beside me.

Vernon stood near us.

"Let me explain," he whispered. "It is now eight-thirty-five. You are lying in the shade. At ten past nine the sun reaches the lower extremity of this rock. At nine-thirty it will have risen sufficiently to have chased the shadow to your feet. At nine thirty-five it will be at your knees. At nine forty-five at your waist, and at nine-fifty on the back of your neck. There it would stay until five-fifteen to-night. Note that I said it would stay, but this hollow gathers all the heat and the sun in August is very strong. Seven hours and fifteen minutes of this sun on those immobile white necks of yours is more than they or you can stand. With that strong wine inside of you your chances of lasting out becomes even more slender. How long can you last? How long will you want to last when your neck is frying and the pains are quivering through your brain? It varies with individuals. Helen was unconscious within ten minutes, raving at the end of thirty, and dead within the hour. Her boy friend lasted two hours. Madame François five and a half. She gave us a great deal of trouble and worry, she did. But then she was a native, and in some measure immune to the sun. But even she ceased to struggle an hour and three-quarters before the sun was tired. That good old sun. The most reliable, steadfast and discreet murderer in the business. No awkward bullet holes, strangled wind-pipes or lacerated bodies to be explained away. Just sunstroke! It could happen to anybody! Neat, ain't it? Note the Sorbo on the cuff-links. No awkward marks on wrists or ankles. Note the bathing drawers. Just the thing you Englishmen wear. A perfect tan all over. And if in your agony

you crash your face against the rock as you probably will do, well there are rocks in the sea against which bodies hit and nobody will look further than that. Neat and fool-proof ain't it ? "

I listened in a trance. So that was how it was done. And now it would happen to us ! I jerked at the rings that held me, but they were strong. The coolness of the rock seeped into my skin. I shivered again. I closed my eyes. I was so tired. I wanted to curl up and go to sleep, but the spread-eagle position of my body gave me pain.

I looked at my companion. He was lying quietly beside me, eyes closed.

I heard Vernon Rudge talking again ; this time in French to the two Corsicans. He was leaving us. He had to have an alibi.

" I'll be back at twelve," he said. " They'll be dead by then. Have the bodies ready."

I heard his footsteps receding. I twisted my head. Pietro and his companion stood beside us. They were lighting up clay pipes.

" Pietro ! " I cried.

" Come," said his companion, " you take the first watch. I'll take the next."

They moved away. I twisted my head and watched them climb the buff. They bent forward as they climbed. Their voices became inaudible. I saw the taller turn and wave a farewell to Pietro. I saw him standing on the hill where Ann and I had lain. He was silhouetted against the face of the mountains behind. He was brooding over us like a carrion bird waiting for his victim to die.

I relaxed. I forced my brain to think. " There must be some way of escape," I said to myself. I looked at my watch. It was eight-forty. What had Vernon

said? "At nine-ten the sun will reach the rock." Nine-ten. In half-an-hour's time! At nine-thirty it will be at my feet! Fifty minutes to go! Nine-fifty on my neck! An hour and ten minutes and hell will have begun! What will it be like?

I thought of the hours that I had spent sun-bathing in the morning or evening sun. I remembered how intolerable it was at midday. You could not walk on the sand without shoes. You had to wear a hat. People collapsed and died as they walked. It was hopeless. "Don't think about it," I urged. "There must be a way out. These hand-cuffs may give. I may be able to slip my hand out."

I began to tug and twitch desperately. The rubber was pressed hard against my skin. It would not give any more. The steel held inflexibly. Anyhow there was Piedro, armed and watchful on the slope above me.

"Never matter," I mumbled, "better be shot than die like this. There must be some escape. Someone will miss us and start a search. Yes, but who? Georges, the proprietor of the Nord-Sud? They will bring me my breakfast at nine. I won't be there. They'll just think I've made a night of it down in the town." I'd been away before and Georges had never been to the Police. Why should he go now? Why should he look for me up here? At nine-thirty the sun will be on my feet. Even if he knew where I was he would hardly have time to reach me.

"What about Ann? Surely my failure to return last night has worried her? Did she see me this morning? But Ann is Stone's niece and Stone has condemned us to die! Ann knows all about it, of course. God, what a fool I've been. Why did I trust her? But she seemed so innocent. Her eyes are so blue. They say blue eyes never lie. Damn her eyes! Damn her!"

The blood throbbed in my head in a spasm of impotent anger. I cursed her in the foulest language I could find, and as I cursed her the memory of her kisses swelled my frenzy.

"This won't do," I thought to myself. "Pull yourself together. Don't cry out! You're an Englishman! You play cricket! You're on a sticky wicket, that's all! They haven't bowled you out yet."

I laughed weakly. Cricket! It wasn't cricket! How often had I laughed at that expression and now here was I bolstering up my courage with the very same expression! I used to play cricket. I was in the first eleven at my preparatory school. Those days of practice. Remember the fielding practice? Standing around the master in a circle while he crashed the ball hard at you. How your hands stung! How you hated him at those moments! How you longed to be batting like the others; but you had to stay out there in the hot sun on fielding practice. But that catch that won the match! What a hero you were! At tea they all gave you their jam and the headmaster gave you your colours!

"Anthony." It was John. His voice had lost its normal rasp. I twisted my head round until I was able to see him.

"I . . . er . . ." he seemed to hesitate. "It's a silly thing to say, but I want you to know how sorry I am to have dragged you into this."

I felt a sudden and great liking for him. It was that strange spontaneous feeling that only men who face death together have experienced. I felt almost happy.

"That's all right," I replied. "Not your fault, John. I knew what to expect when I started out. I'm sorry to have made such a mess of it."

"Funny what people think of at moments like this.

You'll never believe it but I was actually thinking of cricket ! ”

“ So was I,” I replied. “ I used to be in the first eleven at my Prep. School.”

“ So was I—at Hillbrow.”

“ Hillbrow ! ” I cried. “ We used to play you ! ”

“ Where were you ? ”

“ St. Stephens.”

“ When ? ”

“ 1924-27.”

“ So was I ! ”

“ Then we played against each other ! Do you remember that match in May 1927. We went in and made ninety-six or seven, then you came in and were ninety-four for nine ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Then one of your men sent up a cow-shot into the deep and ran two for it and was then caught out ? ”

“ Of course I do. I was that boy ! ”

“ You weren't ? I caught you out ! ”

We laughed weakly.

“ What a bloody coincidence ! ”

“ Who would have thought then that we would end up like this ? Do you think they'd release us if they knew ? ”

“ They wouldn't understand. Only an Englishman would do such a crazy thing. Have you got the time ? ”

I looked at my watch.

“ Five to nine,” I said quietly.

“ Oh, thanks,” replied John.

There was a silence.

“ They'll be bringing my breakfast in five minutes' time,” I said hurriedly. “ The little maid at the Nord-Sud will think the worse ! ”

"The damnable thing is to know that we've failed," muttered John. "We're still as far away from the solution as ever."

"Someone else will tumble to it," I said in consolation.

"There is such a little time left. Even Calvi, when it can spare the time is talking of war."

"Well, we would probably have been killed in it."

"Yes, but at least we would have done some good. Is there no way out?"

"Can't make any impression on these rings and no one has yet been able to arrest the sun in its flight. Even an eclipse would only postpone the end for a few minutes."

"Damn!" muttered John and said no more.

The minutes passed slowly. I could hear my watch ticking against my wrist. Five past nine! The invisible enemy was creeping up behind us. In five minutes' time it would touch our rock, in twenty-five our feet. Sweat came to my forehead.

I forced my mind away from it. I looked back on my life. The whole panorama passed through my brain. I lingered lovingly at certain stages. The minutes passed slowly.

Ten past nine. The sun was on our rock. Its bright light was already warming the hard stone. How sweet was that first kiss. She stood under the chestnut tree. I was seventeen then. I kissed her three times. The ecstasy of that second kiss, still remained with me. We'll meet to-morrow, but we never saw each other again. I waited all night at the café and went away in disgust. It was only later that I learnt that she, too, had waited all night for me at another café! Copenhagen bright with lights. The Tivoli all clamour and noise. That birthday cake made of flat pastry.

The omelettes we cooked at home. Joan ! She taught me a lot ; to laugh at myself and judge women by the taste of their lipstick. Rosemary, Barbara, Claire, they all came bringing their fleeting half-forgotten memories, each a spectre with a plethora of pictures.

Nine-twenty ! The hands must have jumped. It was only ten past when I last looked. Ten minutes to go. Like a sports meeting. The egg and spoon race. The sack race, feverishly clutching sack to tummy with one's toes pressed firmly into the corners. The balloon race. I won it. My balloon had a leak. It was subsiding gently. I reached the tape only just in time. Its shrivelled body lay in the palm of my hand. I kept it many years. It was lost in the end, of course, and I never even noticed its disappearance.

Nine-thirty ! God, how the minutes crawled.

Suddenly a drop of water splashed on the rock. This was followed by another and then another. The moist circles forming in the dust fascinated me.

"Rain !" cried John in astonishment. "Rain in August ?"

I twisted my head to the utmost, straining at the muscles in my neck and back. The whole sky was blue, not sky blue, but lead blue, the dark leaden blue of storm clouds. Even as I looked the isolated splashes came down faster and nearer. A wind sprang up with a roar as if from nowhere. The trees shook and bent ; the *maquis* rustled as if alive with snakes and the rain came pouring down in an unending torrent.

I twisted back. The water jumped and splashed in my face. It ran in trickles between my ribs and across my stomach. It beat upon my bare skin. The noise was deafening. I peered to my right. All vision was at an end. There was nothing but a curtain of gleaming water. To my left the same. I wondered

what our guard was doing. The water rushed madly in a torrent down the rock, lapping against my body. I had to hold my head up to avoid the rush of water on my face.

"Looks as though we'll be drowned and not fired," gasped John above the roar of water.

Then the lightning came. Great jagged flashes forked across the rain, followed by the cracking of the thunder claps. The world was no longer human. The lightning shone on the rain. The thunder drowned the crash of the wind. The trees moaned, shedding leaves and branches. One cracked and fell to destruction fifteen yards from where I lay. The world had gone crazy! It was the Judgment Day!

It went on and on and on. I was shivering and panting from the cold. My fingers were numb, my ear-drums weary. I looked at my watch. Nine-forty. The sun should have been on my waist, but instead there was nothing but water!

Time passed unnoticed and unfelt in the unending torrent.

The next time I looked at my watch it was ten o'clock. The sun should have been on my neck for ten minutes. It was then that my greatest fear began, for if the storm passed the sun would start its work. I began to imagine breaks in the storm. Yes, the rain was lessening! There was not so much thunder now! The wind was dying. The sun would soon break through. No, then came the wind, redoubled in violence, hissing and screaming through the boughs.

"How long will this last?" I shouted.

"God knows," cried John. "I've never known this happen before. A tropical storm. It may go as quickly as it started."

Ten-thirty. I looked at the hands of my watch in fascination. If time passed slowly before, its passage was infinitely slower now. Hope increased my misery. A little voice kept saying : " It may last all day. The sun is gone at five-fifteen. You'll be safe for another day." That was the snag. For another day. It would not rain for ever and we were still prisoners. But as long as there was life there was hope, wasn't there ? Yes, but five-fifteen was a long way off and Helen had died within the hour. I began to make calculations. It was ten-forty-five now. Six and a half hours to go ! Suppose it rained for five hours. That would leave an hour and a half. It would take half an hour to dry our bodies, the sun would be weak then. Tchistovsky had lasted two hours. Madame François five. The effect of the wine would have worn off. The sun's rays would have to pierce layers of moist air. The steaming land would protect us. If only the rain would last five hours. It had lasted almost an hour and a half now. We might last out if the rain lasted another five hours. . .

It was while I was engaged in these calculations that I saw something that made me believe my mind was going. In the limited field of view granted me there had suddenly appeared a pair of women's feet ! The feet were encased in sandals. Coloured, sodden, muddy sandals, but real sandals all the same. I blinked uncertainly.

" Anthony ! Anthony ! " cried a voice above me, an agonised voice full of the terror of the unknown. I twisted my head up. The feet moved and Ann bent down to me.

" Are you all right ? " she cried. The rain was slashing at her face and had beaten down her hair in long dark coils about her head. A thin mackintosh

was gleaming with water. There were tears or rain-drops in her eyes.

"Thank God!" she whispered as I looked at her.

"What are you doing here?" I gasped, my mind fuzzy with uncertainty.

"Vserolov brought me here. How can I get you free?"

I jingled my fetters. She began to work on them. I remembered the guard.

"There's a man on guard on the hill. Look out," I cried.

I heard another voice. That of Vserolov. It was deep and calm.

"He has been removed," he said quietly. "He got in my way." Then to Ann: "Can you free him?"

"I think so. These things are not locked, just clipped together."

My left hand was free, then my right. I brought my arms together and twisting round sat up. Ann was bending over my legs working quickly at the shackles about them. The luxury of bringing my arms to my side again was almost unbearable. I braced my face to the rain and stretched my body. My legs were free. Very gently and very gingerly Ann helped me to my feet. To my feet again! I clutched her. I was trembling with relief. I attempted a few steps. My joints creaked reluctantly.

"Anthony, Anthony!" cried Ann. "Thank God you're safe."

She held me tight. She was crying now. Her face was turned towards me. Her blue eyes were full of love. I held her close and kissed her. Her face was wet and cold, but her lips were warm. They seemed to give me new life.

"Finished?" said a cheerful voice behind me.

It was John. He was walking gingerly up and down, jerking his legs and exercising his muscles. The rain still poured down but none of us noticed it until Vserolov, who looked very wet and miserable, said :

" We go home, yes ? "

" Where are your clothes ? " asked Ann.

" Over there." I pointed to the place where we had been forced to undress. There was no sign of clothes.

" Vernon's got them."

" Come, please come quickly," said Vserolov. " The car is in the road and those devils may be back at any time."

Realising the wisdom of this statement we delayed no longer but made our way to the road. It was a hilarious journey. The reaction was setting in and we laughed at everything : at our appearance, at the thorns that attacked our bare feet, at Ann's damp hair, and at Vserolov's dourness.

The car, one of Ignace's taxis, complete with shining hood and mica side curtains, stood quietly in the road. The same chauffeur that had fetched us from Bonifatio once before sat at the wheel.

He looked at us in astonishment. His thoughts must have been amusing. These clients of his did the oddest thing. What could two Englishmen find amusing sitting in the rain in bathing suits ? However, we were not concerned with his possible thoughts as we filed into his car. Seats, real seats and now no more rain ! Ann began rubbing my shoulders with one end of the car rug while I dried her face with the other.

The car started up and was soon picking a careful way through the rain down the road again towards Calvi. We were coming back as Vernon had said, but we were coming back alive—and very angry.

SEVEN

WE had been travelling a few minutes when Vserolov remarked: "Where do you want to go?"

The roar of the rain rose above the clatter of the engine, though now that we were on the lower hills the lightning which circled the peaks was behind us.

"Where can we go?" muttered John.

"My flat," said Ann.

"With Ned Stone liable to walk in at any moment? We are not that crazy." The old superiority had returned to his voice.

"What's the matter with Uncle Ned?" asked Ann.

There was an awkward silence. In the excitement of the rescue we had quite forgotten that our rescuer was the niece of our prospective murderer, and might herself, be involved in the game. This latter theory, however, could now be dispelled. No one takes all the trouble to plan an intricate death and carry out a rescue at the last moment, do they? Or do they? Was this some further refinement? Were they playing cat-and-mouse with us? These suspicions entered my head. One of the disadvantages of being a Secret Service Agent is that you can never really trust anyone, and are inclined to see the most cunning and devilish intentions in the most innocent of actions.

"Have you both lost your tongues?" asked Ann, with a laugh.

John licked his lips and in his best foreign office manner inclined his head towards the girl and asked with evident interest:

"How long have you known your uncle?"

"He's been that way ever since I was born," replied

the girl. There was just a trace of teasing in her voice.

"That is what you think. However, have you been with him very much?"

"Oh, no. This is the first time I have ever seen him."

"What makes you so sure he is your uncle?"

"His name is Stone. He received the telegram I sent him. He seemed to know all about me. I've never thought twice about it."

"So that for all you know he may be—shall we say—an impostor?"

"Uncle Ned? He's such a sweet old thing. Why should he be an impostor?"

"A disguise to cover another self."

"Why be so sweet to me? He could easily have ignored my telegram if he were—an impostor. Anyhow what is all this talk about impostors? Why should anybody want to be Uncle Ned?"

This, knowing Uncle Ned, sounded very reasonable. John merely frowned and, gazing fixedly at the girl, began in a patronising tone of voice:

"My dear young woman . . ."

"I'm not dear and I'm certainly not yours," retorted Ann.

John inclined his head in acknowledgment and continued: "There have been three murders and two attempted murders. If it had not been for you and Vserolov we would have died as soon as the rain stopped."

"A pity we turned up."

"Thank you. The point is this, however. Someone planned these murders and that someone was your

'Uncle Ned.' Now I cannot but help remarking that there is a great difference between you and him."

"Isn't he clever?" said Ann to me.

"It is, in fact, hard to believe that you are the same family. If he is not your uncle, who are you?"

"Me? Me, I suppose, and he is him!"

"This is important," frowned John.

"Sorry, inspector. I'm listening."

"Have you ever seen a photograph of your uncle?"

"My guardian has one."

"Is it like him?"

"It's a locket. You know the thing: oval-shaped with a blue-eyed, golden-haired boy looking wistfully at you. As a likeness it is poor."

"So that there is no reason to suppose that Uncle Ned is, in fact, Uncle Ned?"

"None, except that I know he is!"

"How?"

"Woman's intuition."

"Bah!"

"Bah to you." She made a face at him.

"Pliss! Pliss!" cried Vserolov. "Where do you want to go?"

"The Nord-Sud," I suggested.

"Be spotted at once. We'll have to keep out of Calvi for a bit and see how the land lies. Vernon Rudge, if only to mention one, will be feeling uncomfortable when he finds we have escaped and when men of his type feel uncomfortable sparks fly. We've got to go to ground!"

"Where?" I asked.

"I'm thinking," replied John shortly.

I looked out through the mica at the steadily flowing rain. So short-lived and ungrateful is human nature that I was already forgetting that we owed our lives to it and wishing angrily that it would stop.

"What about a nudist camp?" suggested Ann brightly. "Nobody would ever find you there."

"In the rain?" I muttered with a shiver. "Give me clothing."

"Got it! Smart!" cried John suddenly.

"The crazy Englishman?" I asked.

"Just the very man. I know where he lives. Tell the driver to make for the Plateau des Anglais. He has a shack up there. We'll be safe there and can think things over in peace and warmth. Nobody goes near him except children. He may be crazy, but he is English and patriotic enough. It'll tickle him to death to feel that he is involved. He'll probably write an article about it for *Home Joys* for whom he is their Continental Correspondent."

As the car slid down the road the storm slackened until by the time we had reached the plain it had developed into nothing more than a steady downpour. The rolling thunder could still be heard roaming around the mountains and flashes of lightning still lit the horizon; but in the plain it was merely raining, steadily and apparently without a break.

The taxi turned off the main road took to a track, bumped uphill, passed a monastery laid in ruins by Nelson, and reached at last a strip of level ground studded with stunted *maquis* bushes. This was the Plateau de Anglais, so called because it was here the British force besieging Calvi had pitched camp.

"I never knew Nelson came to Calvi," said Ann after the origin of the table-land's name had been explained to her.

"It was here that he lost his eye," I replied. "Didn't I tell you that in the ship coming over?"

We moved forward a few hundred yards until a wooden shack, set in a wide open space came into view. It was a miserable looking place in the rain, and consisted of a long low bungalow, with a crooked tube for a chimney pointing from it, and an outbuilding which gave the whole place the appearance of a none too prosperous chicken farm. There was an open verandah in front, on which lay two wicker chairs and a faded deck-chair sodden and overturned by the storm. There was no sign of life.

The car squelched to a stop. A rickety door squeaked open and a thin man in shirt sleeves came running out, followed by three black cats.

"Did you come across there?" he cried in great trepidation pointing to the open space in front of the bungalow.

"Yes," said Ann. "I hope we haven't done wrong."

The extraordinary man did not bother to answer, but ran headlong out into the rain as if unconscious of its wet embrace. We watched him in fascinated silence. Every now and then he bent down and peered at the ground upon which the tracks of our car were visible.

"Whatever is he doing?" asked Ann.

"Search me," I replied.

Smart returned presently.

"Thank God you've done no harm," he said.

"To what?" asked John.

"The pitch," said Smart simply. "I'm having a hell of a struggle to get it going. This rain should bring the grass up nicely."

"Pitch?" I cried.

"Yes, cricket y'know," said Smart. "Very keen on the game. I'm the president and founder of the R.S.P.C.A. you know."

I could not understand what cricket had to do with prevention of cruelty to animals. They were the only things that did not suffer, unless he had in mind those horse-drawn rollers one sees at times. He said it too, as if he expected us to know what it meant. We did not dare ask him for an explanation.

"Come in," he said. "Come in. How many of you are there?"

He began counting us. "Four and the chauffeur. Stay for lunch I hope? Plenty of food in the house. Delighted to see you. My name's Smart."

Without more ado he turned and, tripping over the cats, re-entered the bungalow.

We scrambled out and ran hastily across the rain-soaked strip that separated us from the verandah, then beckoned by our unusual host we entered his home.

We found ourselves in a large and dim room. It had so many doors, curtains and screens that it seemed endless. One could almost imagine it extending indefinitely to every corner of the world, where Englishmen like Smart lived free from woman's interference. Photographs formed the only mural decoration in a room that was sparsely furnished in poor taste. The photographs, however, made up in their number for the lack of other ornaments. Each was a portrait group and Smart appeared in all and each. There were the school groups with Smart, a small thin boy in spectacles, gazing hopefully at the photographer. There were the cricketing group with Smart in pads, Smart out of pads, Smart holding (uncomfortably) a woman's (his mother's) hand, Smart happy, Smart serious, Smart

bored and finally Smart being presented with a silver pot.

Then came Smart grown up, Smart in the local cricket eleven, soccer team and rugger fifteen ! A busy man ! Finally there came the newest of the photographs : Smart as President of the Rightful Society for the Propagation of Cricket Abroad ! So that was what R.S.P.C.A. meant to Smart. The emblem of the Society, crossed bats, was enclosed in its motto :

" Permanendo Vincimus,"

which seemed very apt, though I could not help feeling that he would have to persevere a long time before he conquered the youth of Calvi.

Smart came and stood beside me.

" Creation," he said, " is self-satisfying. Three-years ago cricket was unknown in Calvi, now the younger generation at least are cricket-conscious ! Do you always walk about in bathing trunks ? "

" No. We've lost our clothes."

" How ? "

" Stolen."

" What a pity. Let me sell you mine ? I'd give them away, but money makes life. I could hire them out of course, but mathematics was never my strong suit. Take 'em. Quite cheap. Much warmer. Come and see."

I beckoned to John and together we entered Smart's bedroom which belied its name and presented to us an extraordinary confusion of clothes, biscuit tins, beds, chairs, stoves, tinned foods, bread and unwashed plates.

" Bovis has gone on strike again," said Smart sadly.

"Who is Bovis?"

"My butling hand-maid or cat's man. Depends how you look at it. A Parisian, unfortunately. Used to be a taxi-driver. There was a lockout and he came down here rather than live on the dole at eight francs a day up there. I offered him the job of looking after me. He accepted, but you know what taxi-drivers are like. Always on strike! A nuisance!"

As he spoke he rummaged about the room and having discovered the chest of drawers to be full of corn flakes, English suet and plum puddings, turned his attention to the meat safe from which he produced a couple of coloured shirts; the bread bin gave up two pairs of beach trousers; ties he pulled up from the wine carafes and sandals from a small mediæval chest lying under a pile of rotting cider apples.

"You can change here," he said graciously. "I'll attend to the young lady and the taxi-driver."

He left us to the disorder of this fantastic room. No room could ever live so completely up to the name of living room as this. Beside the beds, food, frying pans thick with congealed grease, stumped candles, clothes and petrol tins full of water, there stood two washing basins full of hairs and soap, while in a corner lay a couple of rabbit hutches in which crouched white rabbits with pink eyes.

I took off the bathing drawers and as I disengaged my feet from their folds I suddenly noticed the name tagged to the inside of the wool. It was "Sunkist." Something familiar about that name, I thought. Then it came to me. Sunkist was on that scrap of paper forming part of the code! "John!" I cried. "John!"

I waved the bathing drawers in his face. John looked startled. Perhaps he felt that I had gone mad! After

all naked men waving bathing shorts excitedly in a crazy room is, to put it mildly, unusual. Then he, too, caught sight of the name and ripped the clothing from my hands.

"Sunkist! Sunkist!" he muttered as if it were the name of a long lost sweetheart. "Where's that list?"

The list unfortunately had gone with his clothes.

"Never mind," he said, "I remember most of it. A line of dates on the left. Then a list of names. Sunkist, Slim, Crepe, Loveliness and a few more. Then two more lists of numbers. One the size, the other the price! That must be it! So it was bathing dresses after all! A shopping list? It can't be! Why a shopping list so carefully prepared placed among documents so important that the recovery of them leads to murder? It must be a code of some sort. But what is it and how the hell does it work?"

"If we knew where these things came from," I answered, "we'd know everything."

I began to inspect the bathing dress. Except for the words "Sunkist" the only other printed matter was a tag with "Made in France" printed on it, and a small number. There was no maker's name.

"Except that it was made in France," I said, "there is nothing to help us. I do not see how this can be a code, unless . . . unless . . ."

"Yes," cried John, "what is it?"

"Doesn't seem possible and yet . . ."

"Well out with it," cried my companion impatiently.

"Well, if these things were made for the English market and their cost, their name and the fact that they have 'Made in France' printed on it seems to point that way . . ."

"Many articles which never leave France have 'Made in France' on them. It's a catch-phrase like 'English Spoken' or 'Ici on parle Français' meaning nothing at all."

"Possibly. But let's assume that these articles are intended for the English market. Right. They are put together in a factory in France. Right?"

"Right."

"Then shipped to England under contract with a firm for sale in England. If our friends the enemy agents owned the factory what is to prevent them sewing messages into their goods?"

"What do they gain by that?"

"Remember that list? How did it run? The first line?"

My voice was cracking with excitement.

"The first line ran as far as I can remember:

25 Sunkist 35 45."

I wrote it down on a piece of blotting paper with an eyebrow pencil that Smart had collected somehow in his rambling.

"On the twenty-fifth of the month the agent walks into the shop and buys a Sunkist bathing dress, size thirty-five, price forty-five shillings and takes it home. He then finds the hidden message which he knows this particular model will contain. Remember, each de Luxe article is unique!"

"Where is the message hidden?"

"I don't know." I looked at my bathing dress. "Probably behind the tag."

I wrenched away the Sunkist tag on the swim-suit. A thin roll of paper, carefully folded, fell out. I picked

it up and opened it. It was covered with writing. I began to read slowly :

"The sale begins on Sept. 1. Whether your friends intend to participate or not all preparations will be completed by that date. Communication will continue as at present, the new system proving satisfactory. Your Mr. Jones has visited the factory and will report further on his return. As the Italians are not now expected to join us the factory will not suffer from competition and will operate normally. If change of location is required, alternative sites have already been selected and no breakdown is anticipated. Reports are urgently required on the following subjects. 1. The number and type of silk shirts our rivals intend putting on the market. 2. Further particulars of the silk shirts that are being made. 3. The market value of Blue Dressing Gowns in your neighbourhood with a view to a possible flooding of the market with our own type. An early answer on the above subjects will be appreciated."

There was a brief silence when I had finished.

"What does it all mean ? " I asked.

"Plenty," replied John. "We've stumbled bang into their system of communications, thanks to you. Not bad for an amateur ! "

"But why is it sewn in my bathing-drawers ? "

"Probably by error. A blank message was sent to England. When they decided to murder us and make the murder appear natural they took a couple of their ordinary garments, or what they thought to be their ordinary ones. A break for us."

"I always thought messages were in code."

"They probably felt the method to be fool-proof. If the message did go astray and was discovered by the

ordinary man in the street it would seem to him to be nothing more than a business message."

"Is there anything in yours?" I asked.

John ripped off his bathing suit, but it had neither name nor message hidden in it. This confirmed Buckingham's theory of a slip-up somewhere.

There was a knock on the door.

"May I come in?" said Ann from the other side.

"Good Lord no," shouted John, hastily covering himself with a bedspread. "We are only half dressed."

"That's putting it mildly!" I remarked. "Better get into these things of Smart's."

"Hurry up," called Ann, "I can't get lunch ready as the stove is in with you."

We began dressing hurriedly and were soon able to appear, tramp-like to the amusement of Ann.

"You have taken enough time over it," she complained.

"Got mixed up with the furniture," laughed John.

"It is a bit of a mess in there, I admit," said Smart with a rueful grin. "The cats, you know!"

He looked at the half dozen or so cats that slipped about as if motivated like a radiometer with perpetual motion. They, however, merely arched their backs and refused to acknowledge guilt.

"Show me where it all is," said Ann while she and Smart vanished into the bedroom.

John and I moved over to a corner from where we could keep the whole of the overgrown room under observation. Gusts of wind and rain rattled the windows. The taxi stood outside gleaming in the soaking air.

A sad figure passed the window. It was the taxi-

driver. He seemed to brighten when he saw us. "Do you require me any more?" he said hopelessly. Life had obviously lost all its glamour for him. "Mr. Ignace will be worried. He said that I must be back by lunch-time, as the Army are commandeering his taxis at two o'clock."

"You can go."

"Thank you, sir."

A few splashing footsteps brought him to his car, and soon the noise of his engine grew loud. Vserolov sauntered in.

"Is it wise sending him back?" he asked, nodding at the spluttering car.

"The Army need him," said John. "Things are beginning to move. We've made an important discovery."

We showed him the message. He read it quietly, asking us every now and then the meaning of a word which escaped the understanding of his limited vocabulary.

After John had explained to him the method of transmission, and our theories on how the system operated Vserolov became, for him quite enthusiastic.

"If we can find that factory," he said, "we've got 'em."

"I know I'm a fool," I said, "but could you explain the meaning of this message? What is this sale that begins on the 1st September?"

"Germany's attack on Poland, of course."

Then John went through the message giving it a literal translation. For the convenience of the reader I shall give this message again with Buckingham's interpretation alongside though I expect most of you, having superior mental powers, have already understood its purport:

Germany invades Poland on September 1. Whether England intends to fight or not all preparations will be completed by that date. Communications will continue as at present, the new system proving satisfactory. Our murderer and chief agent (Stone) has visited the factory (and eliminated opposition) and will tell you in person of this when he gets back to England. As Italy is not expected to declare war on France the factory (which must therefore be near the Italian frontier) will not suffer from hostilities and will operate normally. If Italy does fight and a new location is required, alternative sites have already been chosen and no breakdown is expected. Reports are urgently required on the following subjects. 1. The number and type of anti-tank guns (or other weapon) England intends sending with a possible B.E.F. 2. Further particulars of the gun (or other weapon) that England is manufacturing. 3. The fear that gas (shelling or bombs) instils in your neighbourhood with a view to a possible employment of these weapons in that area. A damn quick answer is required, or else . . . !

The sale begins on September 1. Whether your friends intend to participate or not all preparations will be completed by that date. Communications will continue as at present, the new system proving satisfactory. Your Mr. Jones has visited the factory and will report further on his return. As the Italians are not expected to join us the factory will not suffer from competition and will operate normally. If change of location is required, alternative sites have already been selected so no breakdown is anticipated. Reports are urgently required on the following subjects. 1. The number and type of silk shirts our rivals intend putting on the market. 2. Further particulars of the new silk shirts that are being made. 3. The market value of Blue Dressing-Gowns in your neighbourhood with a view to a possible flooding of the market with our own type. An early answer on the above subjects will be appreciated.

"What interests us most," said John, "are the references to this factory. As you can see it is situated within range of an Italian attack. Now nobody has any great confidence in the Italians so it must be very near the Italian frontier. I would suggest three possible places: Savoy, the Riviera or Corsica. Let's

take Corsica first. You, Vserolov, know this island well. Are there any such factories ? ”

“ None,” said the Russian decisively. “ The Corsicans are too lazy to bother about factories, yes ? ”

“ Good, what about Savoy ? ”

“ Possible, but unlikely owing to the mountainous nature of the country. Industrial enterprise in Savoy consists mainly in the electric plants, the silk and the scent. It would be possible to establish a factory of this kind, but I’ve never heard of any. The Riviera would be my choice.”

“ I agree,” said John.

“ Factories on the Riviera ! ” I cried. “ Sounds impossible.”

“ There are, of course, a number in Nice,” said Vserolov, “ of the luxury trade, and I bet myself your factory is in or near that town.”

“ We can make sure very easily,” said John.

“ How ? ” I asked.

“ By a visit to Stone’s yacht as soon as possible.”

“ It might be fruitful,” nodded Vserolov.

“ How are you going to do it ? ” I asked.

“ That is where you and Ann can help. She must get Stone and his woman to Yetty’s Bar as soon as possible, preferably to-morrow night, and while you keep them under observation I’ll make the yacht. It is near shore and a night swim will do me good.”

“ Won’t my reappearance in Calvi cause something of a surprise to our enemies ? ”

“ Naturally,” said John, “ but if you remember to keep well in the crowd and never let yourself be caught alone they will not touch you. They have no more desire to cause a stir than a husband coming home at night has. Just remember that there is safety in numbers. Don’t you agree, Vserolov ? ”

"Explicitly."

"What about Ann?" I said. "Do you trust her now?"

"That girl is on the level," said Vserolov with conviction. "I notice you disappear from the dance. She wait for your return until all had gone but she and me, and the English doctor and his wife. They were talking with her, to cheer her up as they see she was depressed over something, but for all their encouragement and for all the drinks they offer her she would not be consoled. I follow her when she left, and was soon in conversation with her. She was frightened of me and I think believe me to be one of your enemies, for she suddenly burst into a passionate plea for your safety, demanding to know what had happened to you and why was your life threatened? She grew so animated, offering what she could for your safe return, arguing that you meant no harm, that you were this and that and the other! Oh la! la! quite the young hero, I can assure you. I could not help her, but promised that I would do all in my power. I believe she thought she had kindled a spark as you say in my breast for she went home happier. Next morning she came running to me to say that she had seen you and another young man being driven away towards the mountains in a grey car of such great speed. I realised at once that John was the other young man and that no time was to be wasted. I got Ignace at once, but his taxis were busy taking reservists to the barracks and we were delayed. At last we got a taxi and came to Bonifatio knowing we would find you there, alive we hoped, dead we dreaded! As you know we were in time and you owe your lives to Ann."

"And the rain," added John.

"You need have no fear of her betraying you. She

is much too much what you say, in love with Anthony."

I do not know if any of you have been in the same position as I was in then : to learn from a third person of a love that one did not suspect, but that one had hoped for in moments of reverie. I felt at the same time humble, happy and embarrassed. I smiled weakly and wondered what I would say to Ann when next we met.

"Well, that's that," said Buckingham comfortably. "We'll return to Calvi as soon as our friend Smart has cooked what will undoubtedly be a monstrous meal."

"Not if Ann helps him," I said stoutly, going towards the bedroom.

I called out "Ann!" in a cheerful voice, but getting no reply entered the room. It was empty. There was no sign of either Ann or Smart. Nothing had been touched. No food was even in the first stages of preparation. The room was depressingly naked.

"Ann!" I cried. "Where are you?"

No answer.

I stared over my shoulder at John.

"There's nobody here!" My voice was shaking though I endeavoured to keep it on a calm level.

"Nonsense," said John, "we'd have seen them if they had come out."

I looked around the room. The window opposite was open. It had been shut when we left the room. Now its dingy curtains flapped melancholily in the gusts of wind. I wormed my way to it and saw the note. With trembling fingers and a pounding heart I jerked it open and read:

"Dear Clever Ones,—

"You are getting a little too hot. As there are too many of you to be successfully liquidated I have removed Ann instead. Checkmate, I think you will

agree? As long as you behave no harm will come to her. One false step and the sweet child is a goner. Get me?

Signed, ADOLPHUS SMART.

For a brief second the world turned grey and unreal while I clung to the table for support, then turning again towards the living-room I stumbled towards my companions.

The horror inside of me must have been visible on my face for John leapt to his feet, and with a cry of "Good God, Anthony, have you seen a ghost?" helped me into a chair.

I handed him the note. He whistled and whispered: "So he's in it too?"

Vserolov who had been reading over John's shoulder cried, "Impossible! He never moves! Couldn't be him! Altogether impossible!"

"What's the meaning of it?" I cried. "What has Smart come into the picture for?"

"Working for Stone, undoubtedly," replied John.

"Why must Stone kidnap his own niece?"

"To keep us guessing!" replied John.

"How did he do it?"

We went into the room again. The window swung backwards and forwards in the rain.

"Overpowered her here," said John quietly, "and dragged her through the window."

"Where to?" I cried.

We looked out of the window. There, nestling against the side of the house, was a large garage or lean-to shed. The doors were wide open and visible even now on the strip of dry concrete were the fresh marks of tyres.

"Smart obviously had a car after all!" murmured John.

"But he had no car," retorted Vserolov. "Never have I seen him in a car! Never!"

"Nevertheless there are the marks of a car. Of that there can be no doubt."

"Where's he taken her?"

"To the yacht."

"But it doesn't make sense," I cried, "she would be returning there on her own accord in the evening! Stone is her uncle!"

"He might have feared she had turned completely against him."

"How? How could he know?"

"Don't ask me," said John petulantly.

"I do not wish to intrude," interloped Vserolov. "But isn't it just possible that we are on the wrong track? Why must it be Stone? Why not someone else?"

"Yes," I cried excitedly, "I know Stone seems the obvious choice, but then I thought Vserolov was on the other side for a long time. Nevertheless he isn't! It must be somebody else. That's obvious."

"Who?" asked John implacably.

"I don't know," I cried desperately, "I don't know. Anybody! That's what we've got to find out. That's why we are here. We're on the wrong track I tell you."

"You may be right," conceded John. His voice was flat and discouraged. "Then who the hell was it? Who was it you heard singing in the bath? If it wasn't Stone who was it? Was it Rudge? I give up."

There was a silence, a heavy silence during which each was searching in his mind for a solution that would not come.

"Oh God, Ann, Ann," I cried to myself, "why couldn't you keep out of this, poor sweet darling. Ann, who was it? Who was it?"

Unable to bear the strain of sitting still any longer I stood up and began pacing the room.

"I'll tear Calvi down, stone by stone," I cried, "I'll not rest until I've found her. I'll tear the throat out of the man who has hurt her."

My eye caught the sight of one of Smart's many photographs of himself in cricketing clothes.

"Damn you," I cried. "Damn you."

I picked up a bronze ashtray. My intention was undoubtedly to relieve my feelings by hurling the object at his picture, but something stopped me in the very act. That something were the words "Summer 1934. Adolphus Smart," scrawled across the photograph.

The handwriting on the photograph was not the same as that on the note!

"Give me that note," I cried.

"What's the matter now?" asked John.

"That note! The handwriting is different and yet the same man is supposed to have written both!"

"He is right," said Vserolov comparing the two. "They are nothing alike."

"And what exactly does that mean?" asked John.

I was getting annoyed with Buckingham's superior and pensive remarks, especially as they rarely made sense or led anywhere.

"One of two things," I replied. "Either that note or the writing on that photograph are faked."

"I can vouch for the photograph," said Vserolov.

"Then the note is faked! Did Smart disguise his own handwriting? Surely no one can do such a thing so effectively as that at such short notice? If somebody wrote that note in Smart's name, then where is Smart? Where is he?"

I looked wildly about the room as if expecting the little man to bob up behind a chair and say: "Here I am!"

"There are only these two rooms in the bungalow," said Vserolov.

"The garage!" I cried and made a dash for the door. The rain had almost stopped now and the sun was pointing a few wet beams to the south over the hills. I splashed to the garage followed by the other two. The doors were open. The place was empty. A large bin such as is found in stables for the storage of oats stood on one side. I rushed to it and lifted the lid. There, squatting uncomfortably, a gag in his mouth and all tied up like a Christmas tree, was Smart blinking apologetically at us.

We heaved him out of his prison and as we did so a shower of beans fell about him. I noticed then that the floor of the bin was carpeted in white beans.

We removed the little man's gag and undid the ropes that bound him.

"What happened?" I cried impatiently.

Smart worked his mouth backwards and forwards to ease the cramp that had set in.

"Very uncivil young devil," he muttered. "Very uncivil indeed."

"Who?" asked Vserolov.

"Chap called Rudge," replied Smart. We gasped. He continued. "Hardly cricket you know. Fellow lends him his garage for a mere pittance, because his car is too big to be housed in Calvi and the cad biffs him over the head."

"So this is where Rudge kept his car?" I asked.

"Yep. I never said much about it. Vernon asked me to keep it dark. Fear of thieves, he said. I was only too willing. Gives the impression I'm so poor

I'm willing to accept any means of making a little extra cash ; which of course I am, but don't like to have it broadcast."

"How did it happen ? " asked John.

"I sent Ann over here to get some beans. For lunch you know. When she did not reappear thought she could not find them so went in search of her."

"Through the window ? "

"Always use the window," replied the little man. "It discourages the cats from following. Arrived at the garage. No sign of Ann. Just the big car and Rudge grinning all over his face. 'Seen a girl ? ' I asks him. 'Why, yes,' he replies, 'she's just behind you.' I swing round and the next thing that happens is a pain in the head. Nothing more remembered until I came to and found myself in that uncomfortable position in the bin. Thank goodness you came along. The air was getting stuffy."

"You'd better sit down and take it easy at home," said John kindly. "We'll prepare lunch."

We trudged silently back to the bungalow.

"This only makes things more crazy," I complained. "Why make it seem as if the little man had pulled off the coup ? "

"To divert suspicion from Stone, of course," replied John immediately. "I did not need much convincing, but now I know Stone is in this business. What was the first thing that happened after reading the note ? We abandoned our suspicions of Stone. It didn't fit, so we looked for another explanation. Just what Stone wants. He's damn clever that man. If it hadn't been for the fact that you spotted the difference in handwriting Stone's name would never have come up again."

"And where is Ann now then ? "

"On board his yacht in all probability, waking up with a splitting headache."

"What are we waiting for?" I cried. "Uncle or no uncle I'll board that yacht to-night."

"It needs a little careful thought first," said John. "I suggest lunch and while we eat we may be able to think out a plan of campaign."

.

We were hungrier than we imagined for we had had nothing to eat since the night before. Smart cooked up an excellent meal which he produced in a succession of strange plates and tins from the darker corners of his bedroom and these, with a bottle of strong red wine, soon put us into an optimistic mood. So much so that by the end of the meal I was confident of releasing Ann at an early date, and had even convinced myself that she was in no danger. The thought of what Rudge must have done to overpower her sent the cold sweat of fury to my forehead, and as I drank my wine I swore I'd get even with him one day.

We set off for Calvi immediately after the meal, having thanked Smart for his assistance and accepted his invitation to look upon his home as our headquarters.

The sun was shining again although menacing clouds still lurked about the horizon.

"If you see any kids wearing the R.S.P.C.A. badge tell 'em to come up," cried Smart, as we trudged towards Calvi, "we can get in a bit of fielding practice."

We said we would, and laughing uproariously at the eccentricities of the little man, passed away the time on the way to Calvi with reminiscences of his peculiar habits. We spoke excitedly and though we did not mention it our thoughts often strayed to that rock up

by Bonifatio, and to the yacht that lay gently rocking on the calm, blue waters of the bay.

We had only been away for one day but Calvi presented an entirely new face on our return. It was almost a new Calvi that greeted us, a severe, busy and worried Calvi that was full of men in khaki. They sat in lumps at all the cafés. They paraded up and down the streets. They stood in groups arguing and discussing. Most of them were Chasseurs Alpins. They were small and tough. Their uniforms were ill-fitting and coarse ("our best uniforms went to the Spanish Civil War," said one in disgust). Their puttees crept in irregular spirals up their legs, and their large black berets pulled far down over one ear gave them a lopsided appearance.

We walked slower, staring at this unfamiliar influx of uniforms. At one table a coin clattered. "Heads for war, Tails for peace," said somebody. Berets bent over the fallen coin. "Heads!" they cried glumly, "heads for War! Another drink!" Further on sat a man under a chestnut tree. His blanket, his rifle and a small suitcase were piled beside him while he held in a long, unending kiss a woman whose body was shaking. They never stirred as we walked by and on looking back later, I saw them still sitting there, kiss unchanged. A clatter of hoofs drew my attention to the main street. Threading his way carefully between the hurrying crowds of bathers, soldiers and children, came an old man with a large rifle slung over his shoulders. He was greeted enthusiastically by a party sitting at a small marble table.

"Called up my mules they 'ave," cried the old man. He winked. "Got any ammunition?" he asked.

"Not yet," replied the others.

"I 'ave," replied the mountaineer. "Plenty of it

up there." He pointed back towards the *maquis*. "I'm waiting for the Italians! There'll be fine shooting then, very fine shooting indeed!"

He cackled appreciatively.

A commotion higher up the street held our attention. A strange figure, sitting plumply on the back of an unwilling mule, was racing towards us. It was Frant! His face was wreathed in smiles as he waved his right arm and shouted: "Tally-ho! Tally-ho!"

He pulled up on catching sight of us. He seemed surprised at seeing us.

"Aren't you going?" he cried.

"Going?" we asked. "Where?"

"Back. Haven't you read the papers?"

"No," we said.

He leant down from the mule and in a confidential whisper said: "The news is bad, very bad. They're calling back the doctors. To pass men fit or unfit for service, y'know. I'm off in the *Isle de Beauté* this afternoon. Ignace goes to-night too, up to the barracks at Corte. He's got his papers. They've taken his taxis too. He's as sick as mud, standing drinks all round with a face like an undertaker's. Classes 2, 3 and 4 have been called up. You can see the notices on all the walls."

He looked gravely at us for a few minutes, then broke into a sudden laugh.

"See this mule?" he said. "I've just bought it!"

"Bought it?" I cried.

"Yes, for thirty pounds, not guineas, pounds. To be called for after the war when it and I are both demobilised! Quite a bargain, eh? The old fellow's tickled to death over the whole thing and is drinking my health in pernod up at the market!"

We laughed.

"Rather optimistic, aren't you?" asked John.

"Nothing to lose. I pay on delivery!"

Another laugh from the fat man.

"You may have to wait years," I remarked.

"Not on your life!" cried the other. "War will be over by next summer!"

"Will Germany collapse as quickly as that?" I cried.

He looked at us queerly.

"Germany is very strong," he said, then hesitated as if about to say something else, but obviously changing his mind repeated loudly and confidentially: "The war will be over by the summer."

He dug his heels into the flanks of the beast, and with bellows of encouragement and much back slapping with his hand managed to get the animal into a jogging trot.

"See you some day!" he cried gaily. "Mustn't miss the boat! Cheerio! Tally-ho! Tally-ho!" and thus, with much brandishing of arms and shouts of warning made his way up the street.

We now passed the tourist bureau and here found the road almost blocked by a hot, anxious crowd, that jostled and sweated for position. From the inside of the building came a buzz of agitated voices, while above it a thin man with a long, white beard waved his arms desperately crying: "But I tell you there is no room on the *Isle de Beauté*. She has four times her number of passengers already! We cannot take more. Wait for the next boat. The *Cyranos* will be sailing on Sunday. The *Cyranos* will be sailing on Sunday." There was a long, drawn out "Ah" of disappointment. The *Cyranos* on Sunday? This was only Thursday!

A woman beside me tugged at her husband's arm.

"Let's try to get out through Bastia," she said.

"No good," replied the man, "Bastia is closed. There are no more sailings from there."

"My God," cried the woman, "what do we do?"

"Wait till Sunday," said the man.

"The Italians will be here by then. They'll sink every ship. The French Navy blew up a submarine only this morning. We've got to get back. What about Ajaccio?"

"Might get something. Might not." He brightened.

"There's a plane service."

"Come on let's go. It's better than waiting."

They rushed off together, she dragging him impatiently by the hand as if they had discovered some secret they did not want to share.

We walked on till we came to Yetty's Bar. The hubbub of talk was so loud there that the familiar noise of the gramophone could hardly be heard. Everybody was having a last of something or other: a last drink, a last dance, a last exchange of gossip, a last handshake or a last look at the mountains. Yetty was in tears. The season was ruined. The *Isle de Beauté* hooted sadly from the bay. There was a wild scramble. Drinks were gulped down, couples separated and in a flurry of picking up coats, rugs and small make-up bags, everyone departed with shrill cries of "Good-bye! Good-bye! See you next year!"

We went to the balcony and looked at the quay side. It was an extraordinary sight. Every inch of space was packed with a restless, shouting, waving crowd that pressed continuously against the gangway where khaki-clad soldiers stood solidly holding them back with gleaming bayonets. We could see the little party that had had last drinks at Yetty's pushing their way like a coloured ball through the brown and black crowd. They reached the gangway and after a little

delay were allowed on board, much to the annoyance of the crowd who screamed and shouted more angrily than ever. It was no use, however, the *Isle de Beauté* was a small ship and was already overcrowded. It looked more like a pleasure ship on a day trip than one which might have to face the sudden storms of the treacherous Mediterranean Sea.

"They're on the verge of panic," said John. "Yet there is no danger! The war won't break out this Sunday!"

"What are they all so afraid of anyhow?"

"Words of course. They've heard so much. Don't forget Mussolini has been screaming for 'Nice, Corsica and Tunisia' for God knows how long. Naturally they expect him to make a grab at the island. They're frightened of starvation too; most of the island's food comes from France by steamer. They want to get home before their husbands and sons are called up. They're frightened. They want to get away to where it is quiet and peaceful."

The *Isle de Beauté* began to pull out. There were shouts and cat-calls and even some community singing from among a group of students. The little ship pulled herself reluctantly away. She was listing to starboard as the majority of her passengers were collected on that side waving good-bye to Calvi. The blue water parted without a ripple, and the little ship headed for the open sea.

It was only some time later that the object of our visit to Calvi came back to me. I stared guiltily out of the window for a sight of Stone's yacht. With a feeling of sickness I noticed that it was nowhere to be seen in the bay.

EIGHT

THE next day, Friday the 25th August, 1939, I woke up late. The sun poured into the room and across the muslin mosquito net. I did not feel very well. When we discovered that Stone's yacht had sailed we returned to The Little Corporal in a mood of depressed thwarted anger. Ann would never return, the enemy agents would never be caught, and we were nothing but a couple of fools left high and dry! The rain began pouring down again in the evening, and every café was full of soldiers endeavouring in loud voices and exaggerated gymnastics to hide the gloom and anxiety that the mobilisation orders had produced. Everybody was drinking and singing feverishly. The deep toned war songs of the men went echoing across the rain-lashed bay, while the clinking of glasses mingled with the cheap notes of a gramophone.

Ignace was in a state of drunken gloom as he was off to the barracks early in the morning, while Emilienne, his little (and usually cheerful) waitress, went from table to table snuffling and gulping as if she had a cold in the head.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"It's war this time," she answered, "me husband has been called up. He wasn't called up at either of the last two mobilisations. It's war this time."

She sniffed.

"What does Monsieur want?" she continued.

The rain fell continuously and the thunder crashed. At each crash all the lights in The Little Corporal flickered on and off. People were saying that such rain had never been seen in Calvi at that time of the year.

It was taken as an evil omen. There was no sign of Vernon Rudge or his accomplices. Vserolov declared that the whole gang had departed. We had failed!

It was therefore not surprising that I went to bed in a state of muddle-headed depression.

But this morning it was clear and sunny again, and after a breakfast of coffee and brioches, and a swim from the warm rocks I felt refreshed enough to visit John, who I felt certain had solved the whole question by now.

I walked down the chestnut avenue from the Nord-Sud. Khaki soldiers were already seated at the cafés while lines of mules tethered together stood uncertainly beneath the trees. My movements were watched with angry eyes from the soldiers, and I overheard one man say with a laugh: "Well, at least our precious allies don't seem to be getting the wind up."

I walked on feeling slightly uncomfortable though I was probably trying to do more for my country than he was for his. All these thoughts, however, were instantly banished when, on turning a corner, I ran straight into Ann!

The shock of seeing her was so great that I could only stand in the middle of the road, arms hanging as loose as my open mouth.

On seeing me she ran forward.

"Tony! Oh Tony!" she cried in a high and slightly hysterical voice. "Thank God, it's you."

I grasped her hands and held them tight for fear she'd vanish.

"Ann!" I gasped, "Where have you come from?"

"I've had a dreadful time," she cried, "and even now I don't understand."

"What happened? Is the yacht back?"

"Which yacht?"

"Your uncle's. Weren't you on it?"

"No, Tony, no. I spent last night here in Calvi, in a dark sort of cellar with a skylight high up in the wall. The rain dribbled in all night, and there wasn't an inch of dry straw to lie on."

"You were in the Bishop's Palace! Tell me everything that happened. We'll see Buckingham at once."

"I don't remember much," replied the girl, "except that as I went into the garage at Smart's place to get some beans something hit me on the back of the head and I lost consciousness."

"Did you see a car in there?"

"Yes, a big grey saloon. I was just thinking how strange it was that Smart should own such a big car when I was knocked out."

"It was the murderer's car."

"I realised that later on thinking things over in the cell. It was the car that took you up to Bonifatio's. Smart in it too?"

"No," I replied and told her our side of the story.

"Tell me," I said presently, "how did you escape?"

"That is the most extraordinary thing of the whole case. I managed to fall asleep eventually last night, and woke up this morning feeling wet and hungry. I expected somebody to bring me something to eat. Nobody appeared so I went to the door. It was unlocked! I pushed it open. I crept out of the room hardly able to believe my eyes and went up a flight of steps. At the top was another door. It too, was unlocked. I opened it and found myself in a courtyard of the old town. I lost no time in going to the flat, having breakfast and tidying up."

"Where are you going now?" I asked.

"To Dr. Frant."

"Frant? He's gone!"

"Gone? That's impossible," said the girl.

"I assure you he has," I replied. "Left yesterday in the *Isle de Beauté* with his wife. Got recalled or something."

"That's impossible," said Ann again.

"My dear girl," I retorted gently but firmly, "I saw the ship sail myself."

"He couldn't have finished his work here."

"Work? He was on a holiday."

"He was a British Secret Service Agent and I have been working for him for the last week!"

"What?" I shouted.

"Don't shout. You heard," retorted Ann.

"Come with me, young woman," I said firmly.

"I want you to tell all that to John Buckingham."

"Why?"

"Never mind why. Just tell him."

We found John sipping a cup of ice-cold coffee on the verandah of Yetty's bar.

"We have news," I cried. "Come to Ann's flat. We can talk in safety there."

Ann retold her tale in the flat. It was gratifying to see the expression of bewildered anger that swept over John Buckingham's face when he learnt that Frant was a British Secret Service Agent.

"They can't do this to me," he cried indignantly. "I told London not to send anyone else. Damn their eyes!"

Ann was gazing at him in open-eyed wonderment. "Are you in the Service too?" she cried.

"Of course," he answered brusquely. "Why do you think Anthony and I have been the centre of such interest of late?"

"Anthony, too?" Her blue eyes extended to an even greater size.

"Only an amateur," I replied modestly. "Sort of roped in by John. He's a professional."

"How thrilling!" cried the girl.

"Isn't it!" retorted John gloomily. "Bang goes my chance of promotion. Frant will report most unfavourably on me, I know." Then looking keenly at Ann cried: "How do you know he's an agent, anyhow? Did he tell you so?"

"Not exactly. It slipped out," replied the girl. "Just like it slipped out of you just now. He seemed very worried and busy, and asked me to keep my eyes open and report anything unusual."

"What did he call 'unusual'?"

"What Vernon Rudge was doing. Arrival of strangers, gossip. We used to meet every evening, but I don't think that I was of much use for he never seemed really satisfied, though he always thanked me for what he called my enthusiasm."

"Did he mention us?"

"No, not particularly, though, of course your names came up in the conversations."

"Well, that just about puts the lid on it. I've a damn good mind to wire London and ask them what the hell they mean by playing such a trick on me. Can't lose by it. Position is pretty bad anyhow. Yes, I'll do it!"

He sat down and wrote out a telegram. It was curt and cool, and couched in commercial terms.

"Come on," he said when he had finished, "let's go to the Post Office."

The Post Office was full. People were writing out telegrams all around the walls and clamouring for letters at the wire meshes over the counter. The clock ticked loudly against the whitewashed walls.

"Sorry," said the postmistress to the crowd about

her, "official telegrams only accepted. No, there is no mail. Has been none for two days. To-morrow perhaps. Or on Sunday when the *Cyranos* is back."

People muttered and complained. The thin mouth of the postmistress remained tight. There was a determined, if weary look in her eyes.

"Official," said John smartly, handing in the completed form.

The telegram was accepted. "No reply till to-morrow," said the postmistress. "Everything is delayed, even official correspondence."

"Suits me," said John cheerfully.

We left the post office.

"What next?" said Ann.

"A bath, no, a drink at The Little Corporal, then a bath at the Nord-Sud, a good lunch, a sleep; in fact, all those things that make life here so pleasant," said John pleasantly.

"What about Stone and his crowd?"

"Gone! Stolen a march on us! We'll catch them at Nice, however, at the factory. But we'll have to wait till Sunday for the *Cyranos*. There's no other means of transport, so we might as well enjoy the last days of peace."

"There must be some way."

"We might hitch-hike a lift in a yacht. We'll keep an eye open. If those French seaplanes return we might get a lift there. Doubtful though. The *Cyranos* looks our best chance."

"A pity Uncle Ned isn't here," remarked Ann.

"Quite," said John sarcastically, "but he's not very likely to come back just to suit us."

"He might for me!" said the girl sweetly.

"I'm afraid, my dear," replied Buckingham, "that your safety and whereabouts do not concern Uncle

Ned in the least. He had you quietly locked up in Calvi while he made his get-away and, very obligingly, left the door open for you to save your throat getting sore shouting your way out. You're on your own."

Ann looked downcast.

"Never mind," I said gallantly, "we'll look after you."

"Speak for yourself," retorted John morosely. "We're not even capable of looking after ourselves!"

"Thanks for the offer," said Ann warmly to me. "To be honest, I'm petrified. My instinct is to fly. I hate this air of distrust and tension here. Everybody is saying that it is England's fault."

"Never mind, have an *aqua viva*," cried John cheerfully as we entered The Little Corporal. "Nothing like alcohol, y'know."

The café was comparatively empty. A few soldiers lounged in corners drinking yellow pernod. The dance floor was being swept by a small boy. Kiki, the wild boar, snuffled around the gramophone but was soon shoo-ed out into the sunshine again.

It was warm and pleasant. The palm trees were motionless above our heads. The blue water of the bay did not stir. The brown bodies of the sunbathers lay on the warm sands. An occasional hand or leg moved indolently. Conversation came dimly as through a curtain. The mountains were unreal.

"Yes, gentlemen," said a quiet voice.

We turned. It was Ignace! He stood grinning down at us in his usual clothes, an old shirt and black trousers, instead of his uncomfortable going away clothes of the night before. His ox-head gleamed with pseudo-honest sweat. His pale eyes twinkled and all the weariness of the night before had left his face.

"I thought you had been mobilised!" cried John.

"I had been, but"—and here Ignace spread his hands eloquently—"they've lost my papers and sent me back."

"Good old Ignace," cried Buckingham. "Have a *aqua viva* with us?"

When the old scoundrel had trotted off to the bar we burst out laughing.

"I wonder how much it cost Ignace to have his papers lost?" asked John.

"Same thing happened to Georges from the Nord-Sud," I replied. "They've sent him back to his hotel because they haven't got a uniform to fit him! He's still making out the bills!"

The *aqua viva* arrived. We drank. We felt much better.

Suddenly I gripped John's arm.

"Look!" I cried, pointing out to the bay. "Stone's yacht!"

There she was coming round the point of Calvi. Her clear white lines stood out boldly against the dark blue of the sea. Her bows cut clear and white into the water. She was reducing speed gently as she approached her mooring-place. We could see Nona's flaming red hair on the bridge.

"Well, I'm damned!" cried Buckingham. "What the hell does this mean?"

"Perhaps they forgot something?" I suggested.

"Me?" said Ann hopefully.

"Tched!" cried John angrily, "what the hell does this mean?"

He drank his *aqua viva* at a gulp.

"I'm boarding that yacht to-night," he said defiantly.

"If it's still here," I added. "It's a slippery customer."

"You and Ann will help in the manner already suggested. You'll keep Stone and his girl-friend here as long as possible. Ann can suggest a farewell party, y'know, before the war starts. Suggest the crew be allowed a last drink. Anything, as long as you keep them off that yacht for three hours after dark."

"O.K.," we said.

I felt excited.

"To-night's the night," said Buckingham with a grin. "Another drink for the occasion."

.

It rained again that night. The water came down in an almost transparent rush of liquid against which the lights of Yetty's bar shone wanly. It rustled through the giant palm trees and clacked against the canopy of The Little Corporal, whose common waltzes competed with the Americanised swing of Yetty's music.

I went to the window with Ann. We stared out into the pouring rain and howling wind.

"Nice night for a swim," I said morosely.

"Do you think he'll do it?" asked Ann.

"Probably. Said he would. Anyhow, we're keeping our side of the bargain."

I glanced back into the room as I spoke. There was Uncle Ned (I still could not look upon him as Stone, the murderer and master-mind) sipping with immense satisfaction his fifth champagne cocktail while Nona, the wicked woman, was engaged in a story of extreme length and, from the manner that she kept doubling up with laughter, amazing humour to which no one was paying the slightest attention.

Stone seeing me staring at him, lifted his glass and cried: "Storm abating?"

"No," I replied, and as if in confirmation there came

a crash of thunder and an increase in the downpour. The window banged and a hurried breeze swept through the room, lifting indifferently skirts, papers and playing cards.

"Shut the window," said Stone. "Damn the storm! We'll never get off at this rate."

He sipped his champagne peevishly.

Ann and I danced. "In a way," I said, "the storm is helping us. It's delayed Uncle Ned."

"And John."

"Perhaps. But if it had not been for the rain you'd all have gone. He's very anxious to be off."

"Thinks the war will start any moment now."

"That's his story," then gravely; "I'm worried about you."

"Me?"

"Going with him."

"What can I do? He's still my uncle. He says I must return to England at once and he'll take me over to Nice to catch the train. I can't refuse, can I?"

"But he's a crook, murderer, spy. God knows what else."

"Do you know, Tony, I still can't believe it of him."

"Nor can I," I answered honestly, "but then I remember once travelling in a train opposite a murderer. He was a charming little man. Offered me a cigarette and told me all about his kitchen garden."

"How do you know he was a murderer?"

"Before parting he gave me his card. Saw his photograph and his name in the paper a few days later. He was actually making a get-away when I saw him. Had only finished carving up his family an hour before. Gave me a shock. Never go by appearances."

"Let's have another drink," said Ann.

.

Less than an hour later the air was clear. The stars were bright and the snow on the Monte Cinto stood out like an ermine cape against the sky. The palm trees still dripped and the lights shone messily in the puddles but the wind had died down, and the taut, wet ropes were silent in the night air.

"Come, Ann, come, hurry up," cried Stone urgently. "Your luggage is in the launch, so you've nothing to worry about."

Nothing to worry about! Both Ann and I were in a state of pardonable anxiety. Not only was an acquaintanceship that we both enjoyed about to be severed, perhaps for ever, but there was Buckingham's fate to consider. According to our calculations, he should now be approaching the yacht, with the whole of his mission ahead of him. He had asked for three hours. We were giving him three-quarters. Decidedly the gods were against us!

What to do? Throw a fit? Ann would be aboard immediately. Vanish into the night? Stone would sail alone! Refuse to go? What a scene and to what advantage?

"What shall we *do*?" cried Ann anxiously.

"I don't know," I replied.

"What *shall* we do?" she cried again.

"Don't keep saying that," I cried angrily, "you give me a headache."

"So do you," snorted Ann.

"Come along, Ann," cried Stone from the quayside. "Say good-bye to the young man and come along!"

We could hear the engine of Stone's launch chugging impatiently by the quayside.

It was only then that we realised that this was good-bye.

"Ann," I cried, gripping her hands in mine, "we are . . . we are going to meet again, aren't we?"

"Of course, Tony," she cried.

"When? Where?"

"In England. You have my name and address. Let me know when you arrive."

"But in England it will be so staid. We'll revert to Mister and Miss. There'll be so many people. Stay here."

"Love to, but how can I?"

Again came Stone's voice. "Come on, Ann."

"We'll look after you."

"You've still got your work. It may take you—God knows where. I shall only get in the way."

There was truth in her words. Work and play don't mix. Work first, play after. We had mixed the two with disastrous results. England had mixed the two and was now on the brink of war again.

"Finish your work and then we'll celebrate."

I nodded, then brightened.

"As Stone is our work, we'll meet again."

"He's putting me on the Blue Train at Nice."

"Then, au revoir, Ann."

We kissed briefly, breathlessly in farewell. In the years that followed brief farewell kisses such as these were to become very frequent, but then and there they held a romantic poignancy that was not altogether unpleasant.

"Ann!" Stone sounded really angry.

"Good-bye," she cried, tearing herself away and running out of Yetty's bar. I went to the balcony. She ran across the lighted quay. Her slim body was the only real thing in the strange light. I had the impression that she was running out of my life. "Wonder if I'll ever see her again," I muttered.

The noise of the launch's engine increased. Voices called indistinctly in the gloom and through the leaves of the palm trees I saw the phosphorescent glow of the wake of the departing launch.

I sat staring out to sea. Somewhere in the bay John was busy "investigating," looking for proof of the guilt of the man who, at that very moment, was approaching his yacht with the girl I loved!

A most unfortunate position for one such as me who could but stand and stare, still a position not so uncomfortable as that of John Buckingham's. This thought, I regret to say, gave me some comfort for, to be honest, John's professional arrogance towards "the amateur" was galling, especially when it became evident that his efforts had been crowned with as little success as mine.

"Oh, Tony," shrilled Yetty reproachfully from behind me, "you've abandoned me completely! Come and have a drink. You'll see her again, besides there are plenty of other women in the world."

So I turned my back on the bay and had a few drinks before going sadly to bed.

.

I suppose I imagined somehow that all would end happily and that my fellow-agent would extricate himself from the unfortunate position in which he found himself. I certainly expected to see him on the morrow, having failed in his mission perhaps but as tenacious and hopeful as ever. When, after wandering fruitlessly around Calvi for a number of hours, I saw no sign of him and again when on looking at the bay I saw no sign of the yacht, the awful truth dawned upon me. John Buckingham had been, voluntarily or not, whisked away by his enemy! The realisation of this

caused a spark of remorse. I knew that I should have done more the night before to help him, but it was not in my temperament to do so. Twenty years of peace, good living and the sunny side of the street had so slackened me mentally that even when faced with a real emergency I felt, subconsciously that I would muddle through! Someone would see to it! Who? Oh, I don't know. Never bothered to find out: the hall porter at the Dorchester perhaps or that solicitor fellow who did my income tax or one of those men in bowler hats who caught tubes and buses, and always seemed in such a frantic hurry.

I am not trying to excuse myself. I am merely stating facts. That was my mental outlook. Yes, I agree, I was a worm, a wishy-washy worm, in fact, but were *you*, dear critic, so perfect? Is there no weakness in you? Be honest like me and admit that at times, perhaps, you too, have behaved like, well—a worm—perhaps not a wishy-washy worm, but a worm all the same!

With thoughts of self-accusation spoiling my enjoyment of the sunshine and with a genuine anxiety for the safety of my self-assured companion in my mind, I hurried about the town on that Saturday in restless uncertainty.

As if in sympathy with my mood Calvi, too, presented a disordered appearance. Owing to the mobilisation of further classes the dust-bins stood neglected in streets, a fact that afforded Kiki, the wild boar the greatest satisfaction, for there was no one to prevent him from tipping over the big, galvanised bins, and scattering the contents deliciously all over the streets. In the hotels, too, life had changed, for the sudden departure of the male side of the staff obliged visitors to do their own serving and washing up, but perhaps

it was in Calvi's barber's shop that the coming war made itself most felt : for here all that were left to serve the multitude of soldiers was an old man and a young boy. The boy busily lathered the line of waiting men, chatting gaily with each in order to pass the time, while the old man, his razor trembling in his fingers, passed from soapy face to soapy face as if he were a worker in a chain factory.

With dispirited steps and morose eye I noticed all these things and eventually found myself outside the post office. I entered. I did not expect any correspondence but it was something to do.

"No, monsieur," said the postmistress, "there is nothing for you ; but we have a reply to your friend's telegram. Will you take it ? "

I did not hesitate. "Certainly."

She handed me the white form on which were stuck the typed strips. In spite of the distortion given to the English words by the faulty telegram system the following message stood out clearly :

REF YOUR ENQUIRY NO TRAVELLER OF
THAT NAME WORKS FOR THIS FIRM STOP
SUGGEST HE MAY BE SELLER FOR RIVAL
CONCERN.

I gazed at the words ; then the truth broke ! Frant ! the Englishman, the typical ass of a fellow, was the German ! Not Stone ! Not Nona ! Frant and Mrs. Frant ? I saw them clearly in my mind's eye. He laughing uproariously over some feeble joke, she apologising sweetly for his behaviour. And all the time they were play-acting. The doctor from Canterbury who had had a nervous breakdown and had gone to Switzerland to recuperate ! Of course ! He travelled

for his health ! Of course ! He did not practise much as he had a partner ! Obviously ! But such a likeable man really, a fool, but a pleasant fool and so English ! Naturally ! He was there when I first asked after John Buckingham in Yetty's bar the day I arrived ! He was there when Tchistovsky talked ! He was with Ann in the night-club after I had disappeared ! What more easy than to slip down after I had been disposed of ? So it was he who had sung in the bath and she who had turned off the lights. Not Uncle Ned and Nona, bless their hearts. Thank God not they ! Ann was completely cleared now. But Frant ! Amazing ! And he posed as a British Agent to Ann ! Of course. Did it not keep him informed of our movements ? What had Rudge said of Ann as we had driven towards the mountains ? " Our little Ann," he whispered, " a very useful little person. We always knew where to find you ! " Of course.

I sat down on a hard bench and laughed. It was a weak, nervous laugh, an excited laugh. I was not particularly amused by anything as far as I can remember.

As I sat there new realisations came upon me and with them a new Anthony Roberts was, I truly believe, born.

John Buckingham was chasing after an entirely innocent man, while the real culprits had blithely boarded the *Isle de Beauté* two days before. Two days ! In the meantime only one man knew the truth about Dr. and Mrs. Frant and that man was Anthony Roberts and he, " unfortunate amateur," as John Buckingham called him, was alone, virtually marooned on an island with, as far as one could gather, very few days left in which to thwart the agent in his designs.

I said that a new Anthony Roberts was born, or

perhaps it was the old one who, snowed under by pleasure, complacency and foolishness for so many years had been almost lost to sight. Whatever it was I found myself of a sudden taking an active rather than a passive participation in events. Until then I had been content to let my opponent hold the initiative while I strove with varying degrees of success to ward off his blows. Now it was my turn. I would hunt him down ! I would attack him when he least expected it ! I would ruin his plan. A pleasant thrill pervaded my body. I felt confident, happy and very anxious to be on the move.

It was therefore more than galling to discover after much enquiry that it was quite impossible to leave the island until the *Cyranos* sailed next evening.

No, there were no yachts. No, no aircraft. No, no other ports were sending out ships. Monsieur could swim of course. Eighty kilometres was it ? Or Monsieur might cross over to Sardinia, but Sardinia was Italian and Italy . . . well, Monsieur could choose. But there was not so much hurry that Monsieur could not wait till to-morrow. Monsieur was English (long live England ! God bless our allies !) but surely Monsieur could wait for the *Cyranos* and perhaps in the meantime have a hot bath, yes ? And some of our best wine with a small lobster, yes ?

Yes, so Monsieur did. Somehow those last twenty-four hours at Calvi were solemn. There was a feeling of finality in every act. The last glass of wine ; the last rub of the towel ; the last touch of the sun on bare skin ; the last drop of sea water running down one's legs and collecting in a pool at one's feet, and in the evening the last twinkling lights over a darkening world, for though war was not to be declared for a further week, the moment the *Cyranos* was boarded

that Sunday evening the old life died and the new, rushing turmoil of action boiled up on every side. . . .

The *Cyranos* throbbed through the night. The sea was very calm. The ship was crowded. All Calvi except for a few optimists were on board. People lay stretched out in the state rooms. There was no class distinction for the first time for years ; the approaching war was already breaking down the barriers. It was cool up on deck. The night was very clear. The moon and three stars hung bright and low on the horizon. The ship throbbed and the engines seemed to chant : " We're going to war, we're going to war," to the night air. I sat on deck. I was happy. Action at last ! Frant, you're getting what is coming to you, what is coming to you, what . . . is . . . coming . . . to . . . you . . . The refrain sang monotonously in my mind. The pictures became jumbled and soon, with drooping head and closing eyelids I fell asleep. . . .

NINE

EVERYTHING was much calmer at Nice. That air of suspicion that had made Calvi so close and threatening was not to be found in the spaciousness of the town and the lofty hills behind. There were, of course, signs of the coming war and even as we drew into dock a long dusty trail of mules and khaki figures dribbled along the road in the sunshine towards the Italian border. The men were cheerful, however, and the tinkling jingle of the polished harness pleasant in the air. There was an increase in uniforms from proud Spahis to miserable looking objects who, because of the shortage of equipment, wore blue football stockings in lieu of puttees

I however, tense with the eagerness and excitement caused by my mission, did not pay much attention to such details but scanned the waiting crowd anxiously, fearing and yet hoping for a glance of Rudge's swarthy face, Entofen the pianist's pallid features or even the jovial smile of Frant himself. There was, however, no sign of either friend or foe, but to make up for this disappointment I noticed with pleasurable excitement Uncle Ned's yacht lying up in the harbour.

Immediately the formalities of disembarking had been accomplished I hurried over to the yacht and picking a careful way over coils of rope called out, "Hey! Is there anybody at home?"

There was a clattering noise, and a sound of voices cursing from below decks. This was followed by the appearance of a Chinaman wearing an enormous white cook's bonnet.

"We no want to-day!" he shouted in a shrill tone. "We no want to-day!"

He waved a wooden spoon at me.

I stepped forward. I was not going to be thwarted by a wooden spoon.

"Is Mr. Stone here?" I shouted.

"No," said the Chinaman.

"Where is he?"

"No," said the Chinaman in the same tone of voice.

"Damn you!" I cried. "Did an Englishman come over with you, tall chap with fair hair and educated accent; probably naked."

"No," said the Chinaman, waving his spoon.

"Can't you say anything but 'no'?" I stormed.

"No," answered the Chinaman.

At this moment a girl's voice cried: "Hasn't he gone yet?"

I recognised it immediately.

"Ann!" I yelled, leaping for the yacht. "Ann! It's me, Tony!"

I misjudged the stretch of water that separated the yacht from the quayside, and landed on the gunwales like a hopeful crab. It was, of course, in this distressing position that Ann found me and, being Ann, burst into laughter. However, with the Chinaman's help I was pulled aboard and no sooner was I on my feet than Ann and I fell into each other's arms.

The Chinaman took up his spoon and scratching his head dolefully with it went below.

"Well," said Ann at last, "you see we've met again!"

"Where's John?" I cried.

"Buying clothes."

"What?"

"We were half-way across before he was discovered wearing nothing but bathing shorts! There was something of a row but he told Uncle Ned that he had been for a night swim, got cramp and just managed to pull himself on board before collapsing. Uncle Ned took it badly. It was just before breakfast and he told him that if he had done it for a bet or because he was drunk, why didn't he say so, and would he like eggs or fish for breakfast?"

"What did he have?"

"Eggs, two of them. He wore one of Nona's flowery creations. What an agent does for his country is beyond words! What have you been doing?"

"Me?" I replied nonchalantly, "I have discovered the real murderer! That's why I am here!"

She looked at me queerly.

"What do you mean?" she said.

I then told of the arrival of the telegram and its consequence.

The relief in Ann's face was very visible. "I'm so glad," she said.

"Why?" I asked.

"As they left Calvi two days ago you haven't a hope of finding them, so they won't bother to kill you, after all."

"My dear girl," I began.

"You're talking like John," warned Ann.

"Well, I mean, that isn't very patriotic, is it?"

"On the contrary, you have been saved from evident suicide to fight for your country! I ought to get a medal."

"You will, before the week is out."

"Why?"

"Because you are going to help me find Frant."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"Why?"

"Because if we don't," I said grimly, "when this war does start it may be through him that the ship that is carrying me to the front will be torpedoed! That is why. Any objections?"

"None," replied the girl. "I am with you. What do we do?"

"Find John first."

"Easy. We are meeting for cocktails at the *Ruhl*. Uncle Ned and Nona will be there, too. We are all staying there. I only came down here this morning to clean up the yacht a bit. After the cocktails, what next?"

"We've got to find that factory. It's our only link with Frant."

"And how do you propose doing that?" she asked.

"By enquiring at the local Tourist Information Bureau. Are you ready?"

"Quite! Let's get a taxi."

.

The Ruhl bar was melancholy in its gilded splendour. It was like an old rich woman wearing the latest fashion in an effort not to be left behind. The pillars, the shrubbery and the deep chairs gave the lobby hall the appearance of a church. Even the long bar at the far end was a venerable bar, not one of your chromium and marble affairs tucked away in a corner, but a long, substantial affair that had no fear of corpulent customers. Behind this bar stood Peter the barman. He, too, was melancholy, a thin, sad-faced man who shook a mixer in deep depression.

"It is war," he said with conviction, "and what a war it'll be. Years of it."

He shook the mixer again.

"What a pity," he sighed.

"Is Mr. Stone here?" I asked.

"Yes," said Peter the barman, "but he won't be here for long. Nobody will be, except the Italians."

"Cheer up," said Ann.

"Yes, Mademoiselle," replied Peter without showing the least signs of doing so, "certainly; that is very easy to say but look at the season! Ruined! Gone! Smashed! And what about this winter with the Italians in Nice? Of course, I'll cheer up! What is yours?"

We ordered and presently Uncle Ned and Nona came into the heavy shade of the bar. Now that Uncle Ned was cleared of all suspicion the very presence of which he probably ignored, he assumed the almost

angelic appearance of an innocent man wrongly accused.
From villain he became saint.

"Have a drink, sir," I said.

He cast a suspicious glance at me.

"Gin and lemon," he said thoughtfully.

"And what will Madame have?" I asked.

"Me?" cried Nona. "Same; and say, Tony, call me Nona. Why all this Madame of a sudden?"

I ordered the drinks.

"You're a friend of Buckingham's, aren't you?" asked Uncle Ned suddenly as he sipped the cooling drink.

"Yes," I replied. "Why?"

"Is he a bit—er—queer?"

"Queer? No. Why?"

"Well, it's rather hard to say this, but there's something awfully wrong with that young man. Just now he got a wire from England. He'd sent one off yesterday after his—er—journey aboard my yacht. This must have been a reply. Anyhow, he read it and let out a shout. Then he turned on me and said: 'I've got to go. Been recalled. God knows why, but *don't think you'll get away with this. We know all about you in England and the moment you set foot on English soil you're for it.*' With that he strode away and I haven't seen him since! What was he talking about? Income Tax?"

Ann and I were shaking with suppressed laughter.

"Probably," I answered gravely.

"But I haven't hidden a penny. They can't prove a thing. I'll sue them for libel," said the little man with immense indignation.

"Perhaps the excitement of being recalled for military duty was too much for him," I laughed.

"And another thing. That trip on my yacht in—

in—bathing drawers! I dunno. You young people have me beat. Thank God he's gone!"

"Gone?" I cried. The full meaning of Uncle Ned's words came forcibly to my mind. If Buckingham had left there would only be Ann and I to carry on the work. Every reinforcement counted. He must be stopped!

"Where did he go?" I cried in great alarm.

"To the station I suppose," said Uncle Ned.

"When?"

"About a quarter of an hour ago."

"Come on, Ann," I cried, "we've got to stop him."

Whereupon I leapt off my stool and followed by Ann, threw myself across the quiet spaciousness of the Ruhl. Uncle Ned started to say: "But look here..." but his words were drowned in the agitated yapping of a Pekinese who very unfortunately happened to be in my way. This in turn, set a bejewelled lady shrilling indignantly and the hotel personnel scampering soothingly.

The sun was shining brightly on the asphalted surface of the Promenade des Anglais where soldiers walked up and down in groups much as they did before putting on uniform. Instead of Blum, Herriot and La Rocque they spoke of Hitler, Mussolini and Chamberlain; instead of "Croix de feu," the regiment; and instead of their mistresses their wives.

"Taxi," I yelled, "taxi!" But, of course, no taxi came, for they were very scarce as most of them had been commandeered by the Army.

We had therefore to run for the station which was some distance away. It was very hot and the sun shone with a blinding glare on the white walls of the houses. We passed across a shady square where line upon line of gaily coloured Riviera excursion coaches stood waiting to serve their country.

We reached the station at last. There was a great turmoil and a coming and going of agitated people looking for each other. Porters sweated under the weight of Englishmen's golf clubs, while the few remaining taxis buzzed into the station yard like bees returning, honey laden, to the hive.

We ran into the booking-hall. The nearer we approached to the platform the denser became the crowd. It was a hot, sweating crowd, a nervous short-tempered crowd, that was on the verge of panic.

A train stood in the platform, but the crowd was so thick there was little hope of reaching it. The jagged corners of suitcases banged into us, and the crowd swayed backwards and forwards like a living being lying uncomfortably in bed. The train itself was packed. We could see the corridors three deep with a red-faced angry crowd. Women, men and children clung to their space desperately while at the doors stood railway officials endeavouring vainly to stem the pressing crowds. It was like the tube at the maddest peak of the rush hour.

There was some whistling. The train with its bulging load began to creak out of the station. A woman sprang at the overcrowded door of a coach. A porter leapt after her tearing her fingers from the brass rails of the coach.

"Let me go! Let me go!" screamed the woman hysterically. "My husband! My children! I must get to them! I must! I must!"

The porter was stronger than her, however, and pulled her back on to the platform where she began screaming in an unearthly way that sent shivers down my spine.

"Let's get out of this," I muttered. "Buckingham either caught the train or is lost in the crowd. Our

chances of finding him are about a million to one; I'm afraid we'll have to see this thing through on our own."

"How do we start?" asked Ann.

"By having a good lunch."

"Where?"

"At Reynards," I replied, taking her arm. "They have the best fish in Nice. You'll like the place."

So there we went.

.

Thus, sitting quietly at Reynards, and eating a sole *meunière*, to the accompaniment of white wine, and waving palms, Ann and I drew up our plan of action, and having done so paid the bill and ventured into the quiet streets of the old town.

Our first visit was to a gunsmith. There were quite a number in Nice for the inhabitants of that town, like all good Frenchmen, enjoyed killing the sitting bird and puncturing the coloured cap. The shop we entered was a small arsenal in itself. There were displayed cases of shot, sacks of gunpowder, boxes of cartridges, and an intriguing selection of arms from a rusty Napoleonic cannon (still in perfect condition, said a notice) to a battered Thompson sub-machine gun (late property of Al Capone, said another notice).

"Good afternoon, sir and madame," said a diminutive Frenchman, dressed in a white smock, which gave him the appearance of an amæmic dentist. "Lovely afternoon."

We agreed.

"And what can I do for you?" he added, rubbing his hands hopefully.

"Well," I said, "we want a couple of pistols and some ammunition; with all this talk of war, spirits are bound to be excited."

"Quite, sir," replied the man pleasantly. "I never go out unarmed. Now, let me see, what have we in stock?"

He turned and gazed thoughtfully up at the drawers behind the counter.

"Ah, ah!" he said, pulling out one of them. "I think you'll find what madame wants here, and as for monsieur, well, I think he will find what he wants in here."

He lay two of the drawers on the counter. Both were filled with pistols of various sizes and shapes. As I probed about I was strongly reminded of the many times I had selected ties in almost similar conditions in Bond Street.

"For monsieur," said the shopkeeper, "I would advise something in this nature. As monsieur can see it is an automatic, not too heavy but with a magnificent stopping power. It is fed with clip-fillers."

I felt the weight.

"With it I'd suggest the arm-pit holster, latest American design. It straps on like this, under the arms and across the body. Like that. Completely invisible and yet you can draw in a second. Try it."

Although the belt was uncomfortable it was, as the man said, excellently placed for a quick draw.

"Very popular model," said the little man. "The last one in stock."

"I'll take it," I nodded.

"And I'll have this one," said Ann, who had been searching among the pistols shown to her. She held up a diminutive thing with a mother of pearl butt, and a delicately chiselled chromium body. "Isn't it sweet?" she added. "Just matches my compact!"

"Can it fire?" I asked dubiously.

"Oh certainly, sir," said the shopkeeper, "a very

effective little weapon and, as madame says, so very attractive. Now for some ammunition, eh? . . ."

The transaction was soon completed and two very self-conscious individuals walked out of that shop.

"Feel like a gangster," I muttered uneasily. "Are you sure it can't be seen? Feels like St. Paul's Cathedral under my arm."

"Can't see a thing," replied Ann. "I feel like a murderess you know, on my way to kill my lover or my husband or the judge who sentenced me to a year's imprisonment instead of dismissing the case as he should have done."

"Remind me to take out a licence when we get to England," I said, "and now on to the next part of our work."

.

The young woman at the Enquiry Office of the Bureau de Tourism, in the rue Garibaldi had been asked many strange questions in her time, but the request that I put to her on that hot Monday was unusual even to her.

"I want," I said gravely, "a pair of bathing drawers; at least I want a factory that specialises in the de luxe model swim-suits."

"I beg your pardon?" asked the girl, opening her eyes in bewilderment.

"Granted, granted," I replied airily. "Perhaps I ought to explain. My name is Chubb, and I am a partner in Jacob Chubb Ltd., shirtmakers and hosiers of Regent Street. You have doubtlessly heard of the name?"

The girl looked bewildered but feeling it her duty nodded politely.

"We intend to open a new department: the swim-suits and beach wear department. Now I know that

Messrs. Peabody & Pinner, Shuffles & Noralinen all purchase their de luxe models in Nice. I, in the name of Jacob Chubb Ltd., am here to establish contact with such a factory. Could you oblige ? ”

The girl said : “ Just a minute, I’ll have to ask the manager,” and left us.

“ Tony,” cried a voice beside me, half muffled in a handkerchief, “ where did you get these names ? ”

“ I dunno,” I replied airily, “ just came to me, genius, I suppose ! Do you think it went down all right ? ”

“ We’ll soon see. If I were the girl I’d call the police. There must be plenty of lunatic asylums in France.”

The girl, however, did not call the police but returned instead with a very important-looking little man with a pot belly, a black suit, and a white gardenia in his buttonhole.

He told us that he was delighted to see us, delighted to think that the artistic creations of his country found such favour on the English market, delighted that we were delighted with our visit, and confided finally that, of course, there was only one factory that did the real de luxe stuff, and that was Bernard Lafont in the rue Henri Quatre. They supplied many shops in England and specialised in fact in the English market.

Having obtained this information we thanked the manager profusely and, having assured him again and again of the close ties that bound England and France, and having listened to a short dissertation on the historical significance of the momentous days in which we were living, we were able to tear ourselves away and re-emerge into the sunshine of the street.

“ Some care will now be needed,” I said thoughtfully. “ As arranged I will go alone to Bernard Lafont’s while you, my guardian angel, keep watch without.”

“ Without what ? ”

"Without me, darling! Oh dear, how witty I am to-day!" So on we went with the misadventure.

.

The rue Henri Quatre was one of those dusty, untarred streets that abound in French provincial towns. A few meagre trees had been planted on the pavements in the forlorn hope that eventually the "rue" might turn itself into an "avenue," but even the trees realised the futility of this, and wilted away in the dust and sun. The houses on each side, solid buildings in dusty white stone with permanently closed shutters and high walls, gave the street a cadaverous appearance that was heightened by the almost complete lack of pedestrians.

Bernard Lafont was on the left. It consisted of a long white wall behind which could be seen the pale roofs of the factory sheds. A large archway broke the regularity of the wall. Over the arch hung a wooden awning. Although sun, rain and dust had done their best to obliterate the letters the name "Bernard Lafont" was still visible.

With an uncomfortable feeling of tenseness inside of me, I walked as boldly as I could through the archway and made straight for a glass door marked "Office."

I pushed open the door. A tinkling such as ponies sometimes make when drawing children's carts came to my ears. A pale-faced girl wearing a grey ink-smudged smock leapt off a high stool and came hurrying towards me.

"Yes, sir?" she asked.

"Mr. Lafont, please?"

"Mr. Lafont?" gasped the girl.

"Yes, please. I've come all the way from England to see him."

"But Mr. Lafont died eighteen years ago, sir. You want Mr. Dupont."

"Do I? I replied. "Perhaps, if he is the manager."

"He is the chef de service, sir. Will you wait a moment? What name shall I give?"

"Mr. Anthony Chubb of the firm of Jacob Chubb, of London. I would give you my card if I had not very unfortunately dropped it in the Channel coming over. Most careless of me, I agree. Most careless."

The girl vanished and I looked hastily around the office in the hope of picking up a clue. I could not, however take more than a cursory look at the books for the office was entirely enclosed in glass and was easily spied upon from all quarters, which was all for the best of course, as the employees could thus be kept under strict observation.

"This way, please," said the girl.

I was ushered into a small room, which was peculiar for its pungent odour of dye and its solitary inmate, a harassed looking man of about fifty with grey hair and a nervous twitch in his mouth.

"Sit down, sir, sit down," said the manager.

I removed a pile of bathing suits from the only other chair in the room and sat down.

"You are Mr. Chop?" asked the man nervously.

"Chubb," I replied gaily. "Anthony Chubb, partner in the firm of Jacob Chubb, of London, shirt-makers."

"Yes?" The little man looked at me with doubtful eyes. There was something so shifty, restless and unhappy in those eyes that I felt I was truly on the right track.

"Owing to the extraordinary popularity of bathing in my country and the construction of swimming pools here, there and everywhere, my firm has de-

cided to open a new department, that of swim-suits and beach wear. We naturally desired the very best, and hearing that the Riviera was renowned for its taste in beach wear I decided, with the approval of my firm, to come South and combine business with pleasure. I might add that I am on my honeymoon."

Here I gave the repulsive snigger of self-consciousness that the real Anthony Chubb would have given.

"I see, sir, but how did you come to visit Bernard Latont? We do not advertise ourselves," replied the manager.

Again that suspicious look came into his eyes.

"Easy," I replied cheerfully. "Your Bureau de Tourism in the rue Garibaldi is nothing if not up-to-date."

Was it imagination or did the little man sigh with relief? He certainly relaxed. He even smiled, and the tenseness went out of his eyes.

"In that case, sir," he replied politely, "I am afraid that you have come all this way in vain. We are quite incapable of accepting a single other order at the present. We are already behind hand on our commitments and have had to refuse work to our regular customers. So you see . . ." He spread out his hands in apology.

I allowed myself to appear disappointed.

"That's too bad," I muttered. "Oh, well, perhaps later, when the rush of work is not so great, you might care to do business with us? If you do not object I shall instruct our head office to drop you a line every now and then. In the meantime, I wonder if I could have a quick look over your works? I should be interested to compare your methods with ours."

"Certainly, sir," said the little manager, jumping off his chair with alacrity. "Will you follow me?"

"The de luxe models would interest me most," I murmured.

It was indeed an interesting place, and had I not been searching so intently for clues I would have found the looms and the gradual building up of the various types of bathing suit fascinating in itself. As it was, however, my attention became most marked when we came to the bench where name-tabs were being sewed in.

The tabs were identical in shape, size and colour with the one containing the secret message. Here at last, was definite proof. To hide the excitement that this discovery had engendered in me, I picked up one of the finished articles and, holding it up, exclaimed: "Remarkable, truly a work of art! Hand sewn, tabbed and belted! All ready for the English market. I do hope, Monsieur Dupont, that you will reconsider your decision one of these days. We could sell thousands of these."

I threw the garment down, and then cried:

"And now I must be going. You know what a young wife is like on a honeymoon, eh?" Here again I gave the awful Chubby leer and followed it up with a wink and a dig in the ribs. "Had trouble enough to persuade her to let me come and see you this afternoon. Ha! Ha!"

The manager did not demur. He seemed only too pleased to see the last of me. He promised to consider my propositions but added that they had already had to disappoint a great number of prospective customers.

Upon which we shook hands and said good-bye.

Once again I was out in the sunshine, hurrying down the road to where Ann was waiting for me. There was exhilaration in my voice as I took her by the arm and cried: "We're on the right track! We're getting close.

Frant's getting what is coming to him," then more quietly, "and now for the next stage."

.

The next stage consisted in finding a suitable area near the main gate of the factory from which all comings and goings could be seen. This necessitated a degree of trespassing in other people's gardens and, though there were some shrill protests, the production in dignified silence of the invitation cards of the "400" and the "Embassy" coupled with a few gravely spoken words had the desired effect and we were soon installed in the loft of a small garage. From here we could see not only the factory but most of the rue Henri Quatre.

"And what, if anything, are we doing here?" said Ann, carefully dusting away a space on the floor beside me.

"Heard of a cat?"

"There is no need to be insulting."

"The cat waits for the mouse."

"You being the cat, I take it?"

I nodded in agreement.

"And the Rudge-Entofen-Frant gang being the somewhat oversized mouse?"

"Exactly," I replied.

"My money's on the mouse."

"Thank you," I replied. "Tell me the story of your life."

"Why?" asked the girl suspiciously.

"We're likely to be here for many hours. I want something sufficiently lurid to keep me awake."

She made a face, a poor retort I considered, but I kissed her and she kissed me, for she was very fond of kissing, and from time to time we squinted out at the

factory in the hope that Rudge or Frant would arrive, but the white street remained bare. The only sign of life were two dogs who raced happily from tree to tree and kicked up the dust in their gambol.

The sun began to go down and we felt extremely hungry. In making our plans we had forgotten the question of food! There was obviously "room for improvement" if we really wished to attain the status of agents, Secret (British) First Class!

A clanging bell brought the factory day's work to an end. There was immediately a scurry and a jabber of voices as bicycles and women streamed out of the factory.

"Do we go now?" asked Ann, stretching her body and rubbing one leg that had gone to sleep.

"Not yet," I replied, "I'm waiting for Monsieur Dupont."

The little manager was the last to leave. He came scurrying out of the factory like a small black rat emerging from its hole. He glanced up and down the street, then quickly closing the factory doors turned a key and set off up the road at a great pace.

"Come on," I cried, "we mustn't lose sight of him."

We did not have to walk far. A hundred yards beyond the factory stood a small white house with a very clean appearance, a bright blue roof, and shutters, door and railings to match. It had a minute garden consisting of two beds of zinnias, a border of pinks, a central flagged path and two side paths running round to the back of the house. It reminded me of those model houses seen in the windows of wily estate agents.

It was into this house that the little manager hurried.

"Chateau Dupont!" I cried. "I'm afraid that once again we shall have to assume the rôle of cats, but first . . ."

W^o "I'm getting some milk," said my companion firmly.
b^r "First," I continued calmly, "we must find a perch that commands the front door of this dream of a house and then you may get your milk—where?"

"There's a cake shop down the road. I saw it," replied Ann. "I saw chocolate eclairs, babas-au-Rhum, brioches, croissants, pain d'épices tartes-aux-fruits . . . !"

"Stop it, woman!" I cried. "Away, temptress! Duty is hard enough without you giving out a list of what we haven't eaten."

"Sorry, I was only trying to help."

"I know, I know," I replied airily. "Now let's get to work."

We foraged around and presently found another loft similar to the one we had occupied in front of the factory. The view was not so good, and we had to be content with a small square window, but the way to it was easy for it had direct access to the street. It was also stacked with a haphazard assortment of household effects. It was obviously a lumber room. I began looking around hopefully.

"Off you go," I said to the girl. "Chocolate eclairs and a dozen brioches will suit me, and for God's sake don't run into Frant or any of his crowd. If you do come face to face with Frant shoot him, but be careful."

"O.K., boss," said Ann and departed at great speed, urged on by hunger.

I found what I was looking for and had soon fixed up a couple of rickety chairs. By the time I had finished these arrangements and artistically placed a small table between them, Ann returned with the provisions. Credit must here be given her for not stopping to eat her share at the shop but, mindful of

her companion, bringing it back to partake of the fève, with him.

Presently, when our hunger had been satisfied enough to permit conversation, Ann asked :

“ How long do we remain here ? ”

“ Until Frant turns up.”

“ But suppose he doesn’t ? ”

“ Something will. Dupont is our only link at present. He’s the only contact we have with our enemies. If we keep him permanently in sight he may lead us to our goal. Without him we have no hope.”

“ So this may go on for days ? ”

“ Not more than a week,” I answered.

“ A week ! ” She shuddered. “ Why not more ? ”

“ Because war will have been declared by then and our friends will, in all likelihood, wish to be in their action stations : Frant in England, Entofen, who knows he is suspected in Germany and Rudge at the front as a war correspondent.”

“ They may have gone already.”

“ That is the danger,” I replied. “ But human nature being what it is even the most carefully organised of institutions needs last minute instructions. I’m backing on that.”

“ I hope you are right.”

“ I hope so too. In the meantime there is nothing to do but wait. Presently, when it is dark, I want you to go back to the Ruhl. I shall spend the night here. When Dupont returns to the factory in the morning I’ll join you. Even agents don’t plot at their best in the mornings, so I don’t think we need keep the vigil then.”

There was a noise from the street. A car was driving past the house. I listened eagerly as I had listened to every car that had passed down that street that day.

Would this one pass too? There was a squeal of brakes. I peered excitedly out of the window. A grey saloon was rocking to a standstill in front of the little blue house with the white walls. It was Rudge!

I gripped Ann's arm.

There was a blare on the horn. The door of the blue house opened and the little manager, his napkin still tucked into his collar, came running down to the car.

"Good evening, Mr. Rudge," he cried nervously.

"Everything O.K.?" asked Rudge gruffly.

Ann moved. Her movement drowned Rudge's voice. "Ssh!" I whispered, straining to pick up what was being said in the street below.

"No trouble?" asked Rudge.

"No trouble," replied the other fearfully.

"No damn silly mistakes like mixing up costumes? You haven't found that special model that went astray, have you?"

"Not yet, sir, but it won't be long..."

"It had better not. The boss was furious. He's been having trouble with British rivals over on the island. Keep your eyes open. Any suspicious characters been nosing around?"

"No. The only stranger was the usual commercial traveller from England. We get about a dozen a week."

"Good."

"When will the boss be back?"

"Friday. Friday night. There'll be a final meeting then," replied Rudge shortly.

"Here?"

"Of course, you fool, and at the usual time. So have everything ready."

"I will, sir."

"Very well. Good night!"

"Good night, sir."

The car sped away. The little man coughed and rubbed his eyes in the dust it kicked up and then returned to his supper.

TEN

THOSE last four days of August passed as slowly as a funeral car. Friday was the First. There was nothing doing until then, until Frant came to that meeting.

Ann and I decided that in the circumstances there was no necessity to keep watch over the Blue House or the factory during the day. Agents, like criminals, prefer to operate at night. Every evening I returned to the discomforts of my cubby hole and every day recuperated from its dusty effects at the Ruhl and Reynards.

Nice was quiet and pleasant during those last four days. The sun shone and the soldiers continued to amble up and down the Promenade des Anglais. Events were, however, on the move. On Tuesday all telephone calls beyond the department of the Alpes Maritimes were forbidden ; all telegrams had to be written in French and stamped by the Commissariat of Police ; all cars had to cover their headlights with blue paper or paint ; and a blue-out (as opposed to a black-out) came into force.

On Wednesday there was a lull in the crisis. The trains which had been leaving Nice crowded to overflowing now went empty. People began to laugh again. It was said that Germany was hesitating. The reason ? The German people did not like ration cards ! The Italians were backing out ! Deserters were straggling over the frontier every day, pleading for food and telling terrible tales of starvation in the Italian Army.

Things were looking up, though there was still the week-end to face and the Germans' disregard for week-end customs was notorious. Besides the full moon had started the night before and the effect of this star on madmen was well-known, and wasn't this Hitler mad? So Nice went to bed that Wednesday night, anxious but warmly protected in a cloak of wishful thinking.

Thursday was agitated and fretful. It was very hot. Nothing happened, but the suspense remained. People were short-tempered, except the soldiers who still ambled up and down the Promenade des Anglais. Seventeen troop trains passed through Nice that night heading for the Italian border.

Friday the first came at last, and with it definite news, and the first of many wild rumours. By the early afternoon it was known that Hitler had given his Army its marching orders, declaring that Poland had refused to negotiate and reminding his soldiers of the glorious traditions of the German Army.

By tea-time rumour had it that the enemy were already in Warsaw!

By 6 p.m. general mobilisation had been decreed in France. The posters with the tri-colour flags were stuck up on all the walls. Mobilisation would begin on the next day, the second. People stared silently at the pretty notices. They read the words slowly one by one, wondering whether they were reading the death warrant of their loved ones or themselves.

In the meantime down at the station there were scenes of wild and mad panic. Now that war was inevitable everybody wanted to get away from Nice, for the town was declared a war zone, and the Italians were just over the border! A mad crowd of hysterical women, drunken reservists and ragamuffin soldiers fought for the limited places in the overcrowded trains.

As night came down on the town some semblance of order returned, for there were no more trains for Paris and walking in the unlit streets was no sinecure. A strange hush fell over the town and as Ann and I made our way to the Blue House there was no noise in Nice. We could almost feel the hot soul of the town taking forty winks before the bout.

We were hardly in our hiding-place when the familiar grey saloon car slid quietly to a standstill before the gates. Out of it came Entofen, Rudge and Frant himself. In the moonlight they appeared larger than real life, and seemed the very personification of evil. Rudge slammed the door of the car and the three of them pushed open the gate. Entofen threw away his cigarette and let it glow among the bright pebbles. The front door opened, and the three dim figures were absorbed by the Blue House.

"What now?" asked Ann tersely.

"Let them settle first. Then we'll follow."

Presently a light sprang up in a downstairs window and the interior of the room stood up sharply. It was a small square room decorated with cheap, highly-coloured wallpaper. In the centre stood a table around which were placed four chairs. On the table itself were paper, pen and ink laid out with tidy precision, while in the centre burned an oil-lamp. It was this lamp that had lit up the room as the factory manager, squinting awkwardly at the flame, adjusted the wick. The only other thing of interest was a large safe that stood in the far corner of the room by the fireplace.

A door opened and Frant, followed by Entofen and Rudge, entered. He looked at the window and, pointing at it, said something with angry impatience. The manager nodded, hurried over to the window and began drawing the heavy curtains.

"The black-out!" I grinned. "Frant does not want to be disturbed it seems!"

As the curtains were drawn we had a last glimpse of Frant taking a chair, and nodding to three vacant ones beside him.

"Come on, I said, scrambling down from the loft, "this is our chance."

Half-way down I stopped and turning to the girl said: "You're not afraid, are you?"

Her teeth were chattering.

"N-n-no!" she answered. "This . . . this . . . is excitement, not fear."

"It may be tough," I warned. "They are four and we are two, but we'll have the advantage of surprise. You really are O.K., aren't you?"

I looked anxiously at her white face.

"Of course," she cried with an angry toss of her head. "Get a move on. We're wasting time."

"Right," I answered. "You go to that window and wait. I'll get in either by the front door or a downstairs window. I'll soon find that room in a small house like this. I'll throw open the door and just walk into them. I'll shout something like 'Hands up' and call for you. You come in through the window and cover them from that side. Move quickly and close the curtains behind you. One of them may make a dash for it. Shoot at sight. Got it?"

"Yes."

"Keep low before you get my signal. We don't want you to be spotted before I get there. Pistol ready?"

"Yes, boss!" laughed Ann.

"Come on, then."

We crept along the street like burglars and let ourselves into the garden of the Blue House. The gate

squeaked and we stood by it, hearts aching, ears strained for a sound.

All was quiet.

The pebbles were our next trouble. Taking off our shoes we advanced gingerly like aged bathers crossing a patch of shingle until at last, we reached the porch.

I tried the door. It was locked. The window of the hall beside it was open, however, and I pulled myself up with little difficulty. As I let myself into the narrow hall I nodded to Ann and saw her move away in the moonlight.

The house smelt of garlic and stale cooking. The floor, a white and black pattern of polished tiles, was cold and quiet against my socks. The light of the moon shone dimly through an open window at the far end of the passage that faced me. I moved slowly forward, pistol in hand, heading for the door on the left under which shone a shaft of pale light. I reached it in silence. I stood listening. There was a murmur of men's voices. I could not hear what they were saying for their tones were low. I peered in through the key-hole. In the limited vista I saw Frant, a portion of the table and the big safe in the corner now opened. Frant was talking. I could see his thick lips moving precisely and evenly. Occasionally he looked in the direction of one or the other of his companions as if to make certain his point was understood or to answer a question.

I straightened up. I was keyed up to such a state of excitement that my mind was empty. I cannot remember having any coherent thoughts, though I did offer a small prayer to my patron saint apologising for calling upon him only when I was in an awkward position.

I took hold of the handle and froze for a second. In

books, plays and novels heroes embark upon the most hair-raising of adventures with a bland smile and an untroubled stomach. In life that is not so, I can assure you. At that moment I felt not only sick but very frightened.

"Come on," I said to myself. "It is no worse than diving in at the deep end. Now, when I count three, in you go! One . . . two . . . and . . . *three*."

I flung myself into the room."

The look of complete surprise and fear that came over the faces of the four men hunched around the table restored not only my self-confidence but gave me a pleasant feeling of power.

"Don't move!" I shouted. "Up with your hands!"

Rudge, in the act of bringing up his hands, moved with lightning speed. Almost before I realised it his right hand was sneaking out from under his arm-pit. The pistol was almost level with me before I could press the trigger of my own weapon. Rudge leapt up, his face muscles twisting. His pistol fell. I felt mine bucking in my hand and smelt the pleasant tang of burnt powder.

The noise subsided. Rudge was thrashing at the air with his arms. He was screaming. He fell. He continued to kick and scream like a wounded rabbit.

"No more movement," I said through clenched teeth as I saw the other three men looking towards the dying man. "No more movement," I screamed, "or else . . ."

I glared at Frant. He nodded as if in understanding. I glanced to my left. Ann was there, very white but very erect, her little pistol level in her hand. There was a glazed look of horror in her eyes.

"Ann!" I cried.

She seemed to come to.

" Yes ? "

" You O.K. ? "

" Yes."

Rudge was silent now, but his left leg kicked every few seconds.

" And now," smiled Frant, " what do you intend to do, young man ? Shoot us all ? "

He had recovered from his first shock and was now in some way master of the situation, as the professional always is when faced with the amateur.

" You will soon find out," I said in my most threatening tone of voice, although I had not the least idea what to do. I should have shot them all, one by one. That would have been the simplest solution. That would have been Frant's answer ; but I could never take that course. The shooting of Rudge had been done in a flash as a *mesaure* of immediate self-protection, but to shoot three unarmed men in cold blood ! Impossible ! The next solution was to hand them over to the police. What police ? The French ? Nice was in such a state of confusion and the police were so over-worked putting the mobilisation orders into force, that it was doubtful if they would even listen to half my story let alone believe it ! A third solution was to tie them up and make a get-away. Tie them up with what ? The room, not unnaturally, was bare of throngs, ropes, and other means of ligation. Who would do the binding ? Ann ?—or me ? Either solution had its dangers, for though I had the upper hand for the moment I knew that my opponents were not only cunning and brave, but very experienced in this kind of thing.

The silence was becoming intolerable. I decided to take possession of the sheet of paper that was causing

all the trouble. It lay on the table in front of Frant. I could see the columns of figures and titles, could even see the names of the shops! It was complete in every detail. With that in our hands a great many of the enemy agents in England would be caught.

"Best take it first and then decide about the fate of Frant and his companions," I argued.

"Back!" I said. The three men moved back a step. They could not move any further as the room was small and they were now against the wall.

I moved to the table, leant forward and snatched at the precious sheet of code words and dates. My eyes dropped for perhaps half a second. Frant moved at that moment. With a mighty shout he lurched at me, kicking over the table. I leapt back, the document in my hand. The oil lamp crashed to the ground. The shadows danced and the three men seemed to come to life. I fired. There was a scream and Entofen the pianist crashed on to the fallen lamp and put it out.

"Ann!" I cried. "Get out!"

I could hear Frant crashing over the furniture. I fired rapidly into the darkness about me. My pistol went dead. I had no more ammunition. I leapt for the window and landed on the pebbles outside. Ann was there covering the window with her pistol.

"Fire!" I cried, "then run."

She fired three times. Glass broke with a tinkling cascade of noise. The curtains shook. Someone cursed inside. Frant cried:

"Get Rudge's pistol!"

"Run!" I whispered to Ann. "Thank God, Frant was unarmed!"

We ran out of the garden into the street.

"To the hide-out," I cried, "we'd never get half-way down the road before Frant would be after us."

"What about the car?" cried Ann.

"They have the ignition key."

We arrived at our hide-out just as Frant, followed by the manager, came to the garden gate.

They looked up and down the road. Frant was cursing wildly.

"They can't be far. They've got to be stopped. You go to the police immediately, tell them . . . tell them . . . Fascist sympathisers have attacked your factory and killed two of your friends. Tell them that they are loose in Nice, that they may do untold damage. Tell them that they are masquerading as English tourists. Then give them a description of the two fools."

"But, sir . . ."

"Don't argue. Here's the key. Get going."

"Is it wise, sir, in view . . ."

Frant stamped his feet angrily and shouted:

"Don't you see, you little fool, that if they get out of Nice with that list, we're not only condemning our agents to death but signing our own death warrant as well? Now get a move on."

The manager was in the car by now, and on this last order started up the engine and shot away down the dark road.

Frant pushed his fingers through his hair and cursed again, then taking a heavy pistol from his pocket began to load it viciously.

I chuckled. "We caught them off their guard," I said. "His pistol wasn't even loaded!"

"Can't you shoot him now?" whispered Ann.

"No," I replied, "the range is too long. Anything over ten yards is too much for anybody but an expert. Reload your toy. We've got to do some thinking."

We reloaded and having done so Ann said: "Well?"

"We've got to get out of Nice at once," I said. "To-night."

"There are no trains."

"I know," I answered, "no buses or private cars. No traffic at all, and within half an hour every road will be policed!"

"Can't we hide for the night and slip away in the morning?"

"Not a hope."

"Or lie up for a few days?"

"They'll start combing out Nice for us to-morrow morning."

"Well, then, why don't we go to the police?"

"Really, Ann!" I remonstrated, "don't you realise that we are murderers in the eyes of the law?"

"But they were the enemies of France."

"I know that and you know that, but who else knows it? We've got to get to England with this list. We've won half the battle, the hardest part is yet to come."

"It's bad enough having to fight the Frants of this world," complained Ann, "but when it comes to competing with our Allies as well it's a bit tough. Can't we call in the Army on our side and make a pitched battle of it?"

I kissed her suddenly on the forehead.

"My dear," I said, "I think you have found the solution."

"Me? What is it?"

"The Army. Why not?" I cried. "Is the coast clear? We'll slip out through the garden and at the back. Keep off the road for a bit. We don't want to run into Frant yet."

"Where are we going?" cried Ann, scrambling up.

"To the British Consul . . . and we're in a hurry! . . ."

The British Consulate was quiet, dignified and aloof. Its atmosphere was disdainful, as if to make quite clear that it, at any rate, wished to have nothing to do with the general turmoil outside. Although late we found a member of the staff at work and managed to make an entry.

The cool rooms were quiet. A sudden feeling that the events of the past few hours were only a dream came over me.

"It is late," said the young man in front of us, "too late for business, you know."

He appeared to deplore the bad taste that had made us break into the sanctuary at that hour.

"This is urgent," I said. "I want you to make out and sign a couple of passes to England."

"On what grounds?"

"I am an officer in the Supplementary Reserve. I have to report back to England immediately."

"We have not been informed officially of any mobilisation orders," said the young man firmly, "and until such an order is received no such permits may be issued. If you will come back in the morning we may have more definite news by then."

"I need them to-night," I replied. "This young lady and I have been engaged on work of a special nature under the direction of Mr. John Buckingham and . . ."

There was no need to say any more, however, for I was interrupted by the young official.

"Why didn't you say that in the first place? Will you wait a minute while I make them out?"

He motioned us to sit down and offered a week-old copy of the *Tatler* to keep us quiet. It was like being at the dentist's.

.

A few minutes later we were once again in the street armed with two sheets of neat cream-coloured consular note-paper on which the Consul requested all whom it might concern to afford Mr. Anthony Roberts and Miss Ann Wheatherton (passport numbers such and such) all necessary facilities for regaining England on account of the mobilisation.

"My dear," said Ann, trotting as fast as she could beside me, "will these waive aside the Police Cordon?"

"No."

"Then what next?"

"*The Etat Major!*"

"The what?"

"The headquarters of the local French Army."

"Do you know where they are?"

"Yes, we walked past it this morning. It was in that square where all the buses were packed. You remember? It was being besieged by reservists."

"What are we going to do there?"

"Just what you suggested, my darling," I replied. "Enlist the help of the French Army."

We found the place without difficulty. It was a white stone building with a gaping door and the untidy slobber on the steps left by the passage of many pairs of boots.

A sentry poked his head out at us.

"What d'yer want?" he growled, sucking at his pipe.

I waved the Consulate paper in his face.

"Important," I said sharply.

"Ah!" said the sentry, steadying the paper with one hand. "Ah! Ah!"

He appeared to read laboriously. I glanced up and down the road, afraid that Frant or an inquisitive policeman would see us in the doorway, but the square

was empty except for the line of coloured coaches and the dim figures of their soldier guardians.

At last the sentry appeared satisfied.

"This way," he nodded.

We were shown into a small bare room that consisted almost entirely of a large table piled high with memos, agendas, notebooks, foolscap, and all the other paraphernalia of a paper war.

Behind these mountains of words sat a young and harassed-looking soldier in spectacles busily filling in a pink form.

He looked up wearily. He was, I believe, a Lance-corporal.

"Yes?" he said, politely.

"Will you countersign these forms?" I asked. "They will carry more weight with the Army stamp on them"

"Certainly," said the Lance-corporal. "Anything you like!"

And bang! bang! our papers were stamped!

He handed them to us with the ingratiating smile of a shop assistant, saying:

"Anything else?"

"Yes," I replied, somewhat to his surprise. "There are no trains, buses or cars leaving Nice to-night. My friend and I are, as you can imagine, in very much of a hurry. Is there an Army lorry going to Marseilles to-night and if so, can we get a lift on it?"

The Lance-corporal scratched his head.

"It's very irregular," he murmured.

"I am a soldier, too!" I answered, drawing myself up. "A soldier of England. As a Comrade in Arms, I, too, am entitled to military transport."

"True," muttered the young man. "What about the young lady?"

"She, too, is a soldier! She is an ambulance driver for the British Army."

"Ah well," said the Lance-corporal in a relieved tone of voice. "In that case there is no difficulty. I'll make out a form for you and if you turn left on leaving the building, you will find a line of lorries about a hundred yards down. One is certain to be going to Marseilles."

He made out the new form, stamped it firmly, handed it to us and said cheerily in English:

"English spoken! English spoken!"

To which strange utterance I answered:

"*Vive la France!*"

It had the desired effect. We shook hands all round and assured each other that we were brothers and that our fathers had fought together as brothers! We did not, however, mention that our grandfathers and ancestors certainly fought together—not as brothers! . . .

We soon found a lorry bound for Marseilles.

"Jump in the back," said the small khaki-clad fellow who drove. "There's no room for us all in front. My mate's fat. You'll be comfortable in the back. It's full of uniforms and blankets. Make yourselves at home."

He winked broadly.

In we got and presently the motor started up and we were off. The vehicle swayed and lurched along the streets, turning corners with disconcerting rapidity. At first we spent the time warding off the bales of chlorinated clothing that kept falling on top of us, but presently everything began to settle down, and when the more dangerous looking bales had been disposed of we were able to make ourselves relatively comfortable.

We had not been travelling for more than ten minutes

when with a screech of brakes and a jolting that upset the bales again, the lorry came to a violent stop.

We heard the driver shout :

"What is it ? "

Then came another voice from the road.

"Sorry. Didn't know it was an Army lorry. Got orders to stop all traffic."

"Eh ! Eh ! What for ? "

"Fascist refugees."

"Eh ! Eh ! Hope you catch the dirty bastards ! "

"We will."

"Can I go on ? "

"Yes. Good night ! "

"Good night to you."

The lorry started up and we were off again—this time on the road to freedom.

"We've got a long journey ahead," I said to Ann after we had passed the Police Cordon. "Get as much sleep as you can."

"O.K.," she yawned. "There is something we have forgotten to do, you know."

"What ? "

"Tell Uncle Ned ! What will the old thing be thinking ? "

Ann was soon asleep, but I still felt too keyed up to sleep. I sat on a bale of uniforms instead, reviewing the situation. Although we had escaped from Nice we were still not completely out of danger, for the Niçois police would certainly circulate our description to the rest of France and keep a sharp look-out for us. At the same time Frant might have confederates all over the country also on the alert. The more I thought of it the less I liked it. I could afford to take no risks now. We, and we alone, were in possession of a document that would be of immense value to England. We could

not court failure through a lack of forethought. As Ann Wheatherton and Anthony Roberts, we were extremely conspicuous, for most of the young English couples had left the Riviera during the previous week. We needed a little camouflage and camouflage consisted, not of wearing a black beard and horn-rimmed spectacles, but of toning in with the surroundings. How could two such obviously English-looking people as us hope to conceal our identities?

Even as I put this question to myself the answer came; in fact, I was sitting on it! With France reduced now to a mass of reservists, uniformed or not, the most inconspicuous clothing to wear would be a uniform.

I set to work at once and soon had as complete a set as my scanty knowledge of French uniforms would permit. These I stowed in a corner and decided to await events. The disappearance of Anthony Roberts was almost a certainty. With his disappearance Ann now became a lone English girl returning to England. No one was looking for a girl alone! A pair of sunglasses and a few changes in style would soon remove all individuality from my companion.

Feeling happier in mind I now found my head nodding to the rhythm of the lurching lorry. The wheels began to sing drowsily, "We're going home! We're going home!" I snuggled closer to the coarse suits around me and lulled by the muffled roar of the engine dropped off asleep. . . .

.

It was still dark when the lorry came to a halt again. It was the silence that woke me up. I sat up. What had happened now? I could hear no sound of voices, but presently the back of the vehicle dropped and a white face peered in at us. It was the driver.

"We're spending the night here," he grinned, "friends of ours."

He nodded at a small house that stood back from the road in a garden of mimosa and orange. It looked unreal in the moonlight with its flat roof and background of cyprus trees. The other soldier in the meantime had knocked at the door. A woman came jumping out and embraced the caller with shrill cries of delight.

"Good company!" grinned the driver. "Come in."

He was not very pressing in his invitation.

"There isn't much room but we could find a sofa for you and the young lady. Plenty of wine. . Very discreet!"

"I want to get to Marseilles," I cried.

"In the morning! In the morning!" replied the other. "What's the hurry?"

"I've got to get back to my country."

"Take my advice," said the other. "Enjoy yourself while you can, as for the rest . . .!"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll stay here," I said. "Where is the station?"

"Two kilometres down the road. There'll be no train till the morning."

"I'll catch the first."

"Just as you like," grinned the other. "Sleep well." He winked. "Don't blame you for keeping the little girl to yourself. It's comfortable and warm here, too. Good night!"

With that the white face was withdrawn and the lumpy figure went bounding up the moonlit garden path to its pleasure.

I changed rapidly into the *poilu's* uniform and stuffed my own clothes into a kit-bag. Then having woken Ann, I told her that we were on our way.

She was still very sleepy and showed no surprise at seeing me in a French uniform. She must have thought it a part of her dream, for when I told her to continue sleeping and not be surprised to find herself alone when next she woke, she nodded her head and said drowsily: "Don't wake the cook!"

I wrote her a note, and leaving her, took the driver's seat. The ignition key was still in its slot. It was, in fact, still "On," the driver having forgotten to switch off after stalling his engine.

Petrol was plentiful. The engine was still warm and started without any trouble. It would be many hours before the two worthy sons of France realised that the lorry had gone, and it would be still later before they had thought of a sufficiently good story to risk making a report.

It was, therefore, with a feeling of self-satisfaction that I let in the gear and, keeping the sea on my left and the mountains on my right started on the long journey for Marseilles.

The distance is greater than one might imagine, and we did not arrive at Marseilles Central Station until late in the afternoon after a pleasant drive along the Riviera where the greater part of the French army seemed to be bathing and sleeping with arms piled on the sand behind them.

We abandoned Camelia, as we called our lorry, in Marseilles with some regret, for we had become very attached to her, especially when, after breakfast, Ann had woken up sufficiently to put on a kepi and tunic and sit in front with me. The disguise, though thin, was sufficient, for the dirty windscreen forbade close scrutiny.

"Food," I said, as we pushed our way into the overcrowded station, "is essential. God knows

when the next meal will be available. Where's the buffet ? "

The buffet was as crowded as the rest of the station. Reservists streamed from it, their haversacks protruding with bottles of red wine and their mouths full of dry ham and crumbly bread. There was still a little food and a few bottles of Vichy water left on the wet counters.

Armed with six ham sandwiches and four bottles of Vichy water we were about to make our way to the train when two figures pushing their way vigorously through the crowd froze us to the spot.

It was Dr. and Mrs. Frant !

They passed without seeing us, and even had they seen us it is doubtful whether they would have recognised their enemies in my disguise of a *poilu* and Ann's imitation of a cheaply dressed French girl.

What were they doing in Marseilles ?

"Come on," I whispered. "Let's see what they're up to."

Pushing fiercely against the muttering crowd and jumping up ever and anon to catch a glimpse of Frant's fair hair, we found that our enemies were heading for the very train upon which we intended to leave Marseilles ! They passed through the barrier. We followed, thanks to our imposing looking documents. They entered a first-class coach. We entered a third behind them.

"Uncomfortable perhaps," I said, "but *poilus* and their girl friends don't travel first unless the train is full."

It was surprisingly empty. The panic rushes by the civilian population of the previous days had given place to an equally panic shunning of all trains now that war was so near. Fear of being bombed by the

Germans outweighed fear of being captured by the Italians !

" Now," I said, settling down comfortably in the corner, " Frant is obviously making for England."

" Or Germany ? "

" He'd go through Italy in that case and not risk being caught in France after a declaration of war. It can only be England ! "

" Why ? "

" Having failed to catch us to-day he must have realised that we'd escaped or were escaping from Nice. *He must, therefore, reach England before us* in order to warn his confederates."

I burst into a happy shout of laughter.

" What's the joke ? " asked Ann.

" We're chasing him now," I cried jubilantly. " Don't you see ? The hunter hunted ! The amateurs beating the professional ! Anything you like ! Don't you feel it, too ? After all, Frant and his little friends have been making life just as uncomfortable as they can for us and now the rôles are reversed ! "

" That's all right, but what are you going to do ? "

" Do ? Why, follow him of course and arrange a reception for our dear friends as they land in England. Ah ! there are the whistles. We'll be off any minute now. Here we go ! "

With a succession of jolts and a crescendo of whistles and shouts, the late train drew itself out of the sombre station and prepared itself for the long drag to Paris.

.

I cannot attempt to describe with any accuracy or detail that strange race home, for time became elastic and the hours lost all meaning. The monotonous crumb-er-rumb of wheels on rails were our minutes,

the stops our hours. We looked at our watches but their hands meant nothing to us. We looked at the stations to find out how far we were from Paris, but the names were covered with sackcloth. As far as we were concerned our train was our world !

Never was there so strange a train. There were no stewards, no ticket collectors, no regular stops and no new passengers. We even began to doubt if there was an engine driver ! We knew there was a guard, however, for he got down at each deserted station and waved his flag forlornly to the engine. I asked him what time we'd arrive in Paris.

" God knows," he cried, " I'm not sure we'll ever get there. Don't know if we're even supposed to move. May not even be on the right track. All new to me, but as long as we're moving we're at least getting somewhere ! "

At this he'd wave his flag, shrug his shoulders, and re-enter the cubby-hole, while the train crept slowly forward again. The need to eat gave a sinister twist to our ghost-train progress. There was, of course, neither food nor drink on the train and there was no food at any of the stations. Whenever we stopped (and that was at almost every station), the train seemed to burst asunder while a mad stampede of hungry human beings raced for the nearest buffet. Then the train would start again and an equally mad rush would bring them all back again. This would be repeated at every station. The lucky ones would sometimes return with a cellophane packet or two of Lu-Lu biscuits. We saw Frant on many occasions foraging for himself and his wife, and it must be admitted that he was extremely successful on each expedition. We ourselves never left the compartment for our sandwiches (young loaves enclosing thick slices of ham

and butter) and our Vichy water were sufficient for our needs. We did not wish to be recognised by Frant.

We left Marseilles just before 8 p.m. on Saturday, and we arrived in Paris about 7 p.m. on Sunday, September 3rd, 1939, to find the *Garde Mobile* holding back the silent crowds at the station and the newspaper boys selling *Paris-Soirs*, reduced to a single sheet, carrying the headlines :

ENGLAND DECLARES WAR ON GERMANY AT 11 A.M.
FRANCE AT 5 P.M.

Paris was very silent and empty as we raced after Frant to the Gare du Nord. A few *Gardes Mobiles*, no traffic, tall houses looking sadly down on the deserted *boulevards*, that was our last impression of the Gay City.

The Gare du Nord was, as usual, very noisy. The reservists were as numerous as ever. There was a train leaving for Boulogne at 7.49, though whether it would really reach Boulogne nobody seemed to know. It was packed. I found Ann a seat in the corridor and ran off to send my first telegram to warn England of Frant's movements. It was addressed to the Colonel in person. It ran :

DR. AND MRS. FRANT PASSED THROUGH PARIS
7 P.M. ON WAY ENGLAND VIA BOULOGNE STOP PLEASE
ARRANGE RECEPTION STOP AM FOLLOWING UP STOP
ANTHONY ROBERTS.

I almost missed the train. It had begun to steam out as I raced up the platform. I leapt for the door. People cheered. It was the wrong coach so I had to fight my way forward. There were men everywhere, all were in

varying stages of intoxication. It was the last great binge before rejoining the regiment. Red wine flowed, Communist songs rocked to the rhythm of wheels, snores and grunts of those asleep in the corridors filled the silences, and over it all like the powder fumes of a battlefield hung the haze of tobacco smoke.

Boots, legs, bottles, bodies ! A carpet of them ! No space for footsteps. Grunts and groans as one trod on tender spots. Encouragements and curses. Songs and screams to the rocking of wheels !

Ah ! Ann at last ! Sitting small and huddled on a suitcase in a corner, a large, belching man lying like a watch dog at her feet, another half out of the window waving an empty bottle and shouting, "Quicker ! Quicker ! A hundred miles an hour ! To war ! To war !" Another sitting head in hands murmuring : "My poor wife ! My poor children ! Shall I ever see them again ?"

Squeezing down by Ann. No, no one had molested her. They were drunk, but good-natured and satisfied. The long jolting night still lay ahead with the cold September breeze sweeping down among the huddled sleepers.

Amiens, and the coach is freer !

Boulogne at last at 4 a.m. A cold sea-breeze brings a smell of fish and drains. The cobbles ring hollow The water smacks against the stone and looks oily in the subdued lights of the harbour.

No, there is no room in this hotel ! Not a bed to be had in Boulogne. We lie against each other on a sofa ! The train is still rocking in our feet.

Wheeboo ! The siren screams over the clustered town. It is 6 a.m. We awake. It is strange to hear a siren and know that it is in earnest this time. We look out of the window at the sky above us. It is clear

and pale blue. Very pure and limpid with strangely defined black clouds looking very solid against it. There is no sign of aircraft.

We go back to sleep.

Breakfast is gulped in untidy discomfort. Another telegram to the Colonel. We walk the cobbled streets and look at the boats. No ship leaving till the afternoon. We'll sail in the *Maid of Orleans*. There is another air-raid warning. We continue to walk nonchalantly but keep an ear open for the sound of engines and an eye alive for cover. We see Frant in the distance looking very English, throwing plates across the quay from a small café. We avoid him. He'll be on the *Maid of Orleans*.

Lunch. Forgotten, where or how or when we had it ! It was probably of fish in a small café for ten francs. But no memory of that meal remains, and yet it was our last on French soil.

The *Maid of Orleans* sailed in the early afternoon. The sun was warm, the sea calm. People wandered up and down the deck, taking photograph of each other, pointing out imaginary U-boat periscopes and exchanging rumours. The *Athenia* torpedoed and sunk. London bombed. Three German aircraft shot down over Dunkirk. But England was drawing nearer. I had work to do in conference with the passport officer. I could not afford to rely on my telegrams from Paris and Boulogne.

It was in this manner that I missed the approach to England, but Ann told me that the White Cliffs had never looked more beautiful for a rain-storm of blue clouds had swept up over Folkestone and had then given place to a rainbow that had spanned the port from green hill to green hill.

We are in ! All is silent. The quiet queue

waits to have its passports examined, shuffling slowly forward.

Suddenly a scuffling and heaving in the crowd from somewhere ahead! Heads move this way and that and bodies rise on tip-toe to see. What's happening? A big, well-built man with fair hair is seen struggling with others near the passport tables, while a dark-haired woman bites and screams! But not for long. The struggling ceases. The crowd shuffles on. Voices ripple in conjecture. What happened? Somebody ventured "a spy!" His tone is self-conscious. The retort comes quickly: "That sort of thing doesn't happen here. Probably feeling sea-sick!"

The speculations fade away. The travellers press forward with eager slowness. The disturbance is soon forgotten and all minds are on the cups of tea boiling in the long, comfortable trains.

Thus, quietly came about the arrest of Dr. and Mrs. Frant as they were about to land on the England they hated so fiercely; while, hand in hand, Ann and I, now strangely alone and not a little afraid, advanced to where John Buckingham and the Colonel stood with hands outstretched in welcome.

THE END

